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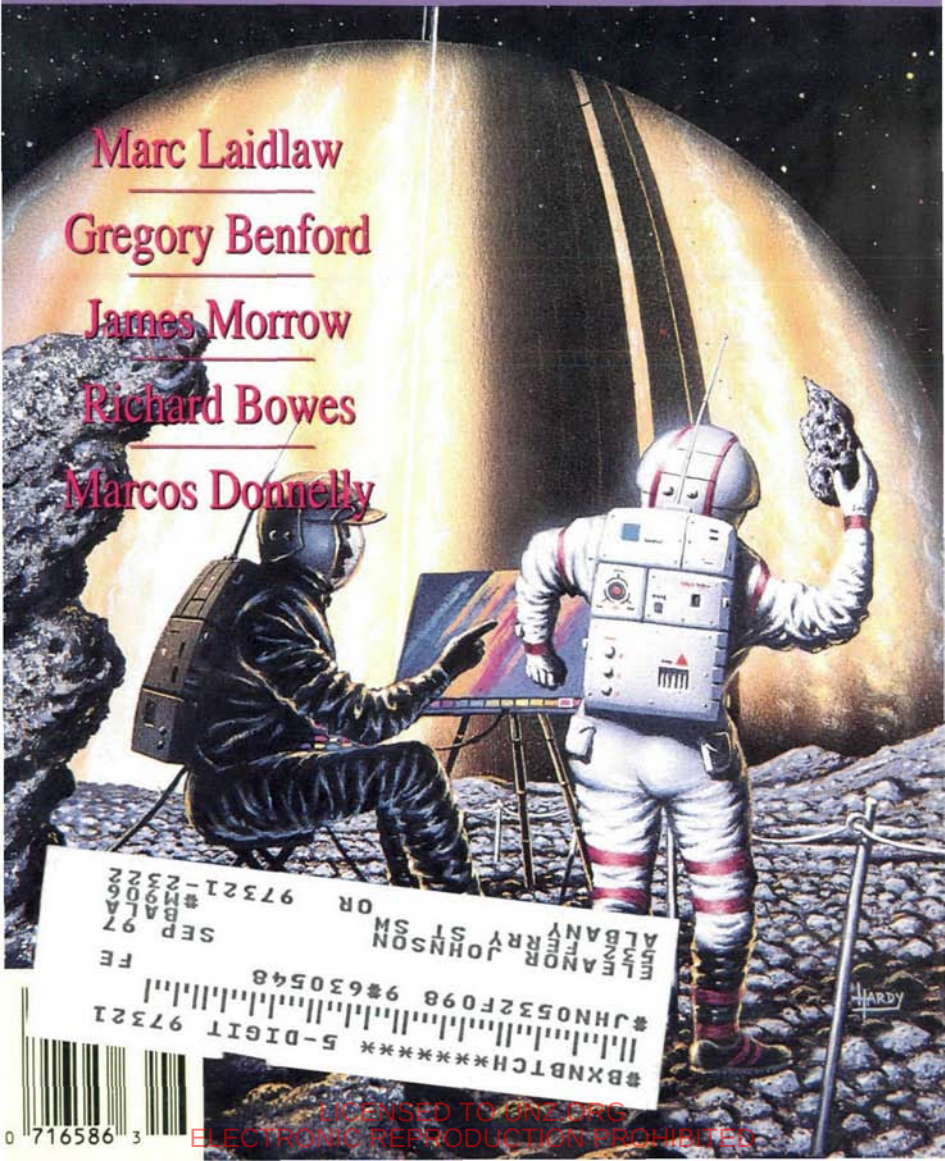

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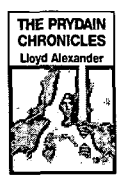

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JUNE • 45th Year of Publication

NOVELETS

BLOODLETTING 9 Marcos Donnelly

THE BLACK BUS 127 Marc Laidlaw

SHORT STORIES

I DIED, SIR, IN FLAMES, SIR 42 Richard Bowes

DRAINAGE 61 Nicholas A. DiChario

SHEPHERD MOON 77 Allen Steele

MOTHER TO ELVES 84 Michael Armstrong

BIBLE STORIES FOR ADULTS NO. 20: THE TOWER 112 James Morrow

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS: GROWING UP, THE HARD WAY 32 John Kessel

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 38 Charles de Lint

A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK: FROM HERE TO ETERNITY 101 Gregory Benford

INDEX 160

CARTOONS: JOHN JONIK (83), ARTHUR MASEAR (60).
COVER BY DAVID A. HARDY FOR "SHEPHERD MOON"

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CHERYL CASS, Circulation Manager — AUDREY FERMAN, Assistant Publisher
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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I AM ONE of the few whose cable service provides the Sci-Fi Channel. Unfortunately, the channel isn't the great time-waster I had hoped it would be.

Part of the problem is my own viewing history: I've seen most of the television shows it airs on their first run — and I didn't find them memorable enough to watch a second time through. I'm not much of a *Dark Shadows* fan, and I've seen every episode of *The Prisoner* several times. Most of the movies are atrocious (which makes them fun to watch in a group, but not alone).

Some of the special programming is inspired. The spate of monster movies before Halloween were fun as are the guest hosts who introduce the occasional weekend marathons. My favorite part of the Sci-Fi Channel is one of its few original programs, *Sci-Fi Buzz*.

The Buzz, as it calls itself, is full of cheap MTV effects, 30 second sound bites and shallow analysis. Yet that fits with the intimate, gossipy format. *Sci-Fi Buzz* divides its time fairly equally between books, movies, comics, television, special effects, and games, but the overall product is a watchable way to spend a half hour.

The best part of *The Buzz*, however, is the commentary provided by our Film Editor, Harlan Ellison. Harlan's short commentary is challenging, bombastic, and always entertaining, forcing the viewer to think critically about the field of science fiction. Harlan's segment has just been renewed and is reason enough, I think, to request that your cable provider add the Sci-Fi Channel to its list of offerings.

Sci-Fi Buzz's closest competitor in the field of sf analysis is a program produced by TVOntario, *Prisoners of Gravity*. *Prisoners of Gravity* has made a limited foray into Public Television here in the United States, appearing on 13 PBS stations nationwide. Where *Sci-Fi Buzz* is glitzy, fast-paced and media-based, *Prison-*

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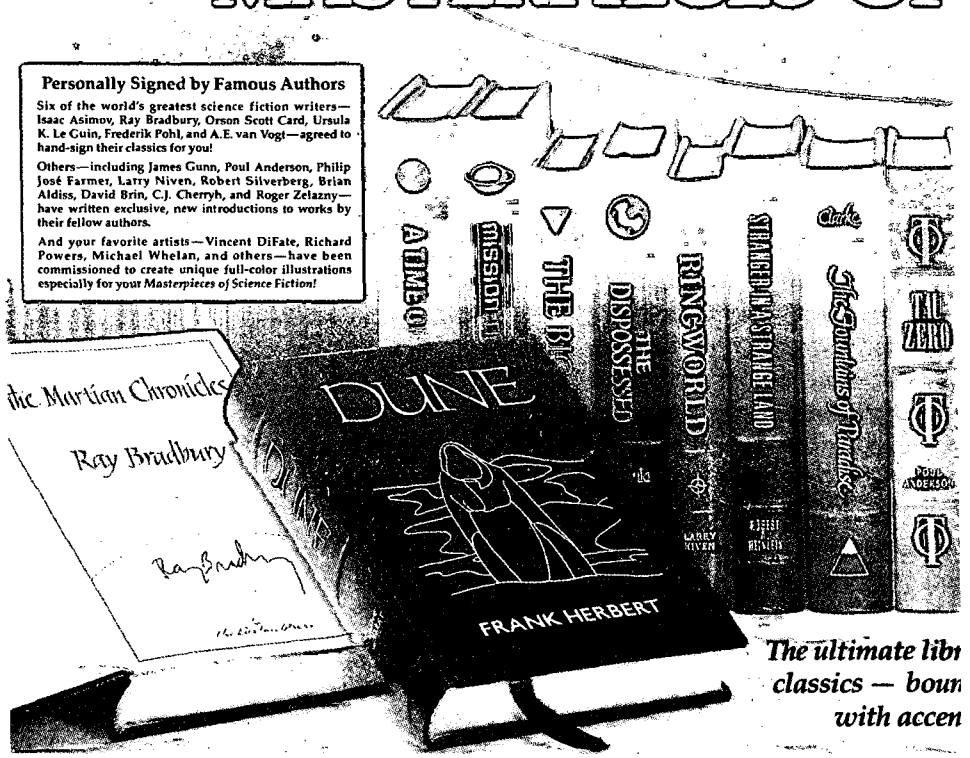

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Gateway. Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*, Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and A.E. van Vogt, *Slan*. And, Isaac Asimov signed a number of copies of *The Foundation Trilogy* before his death in 1992 (due to their limited supply, you should act promptly to avoid disappointment). These extraordinary

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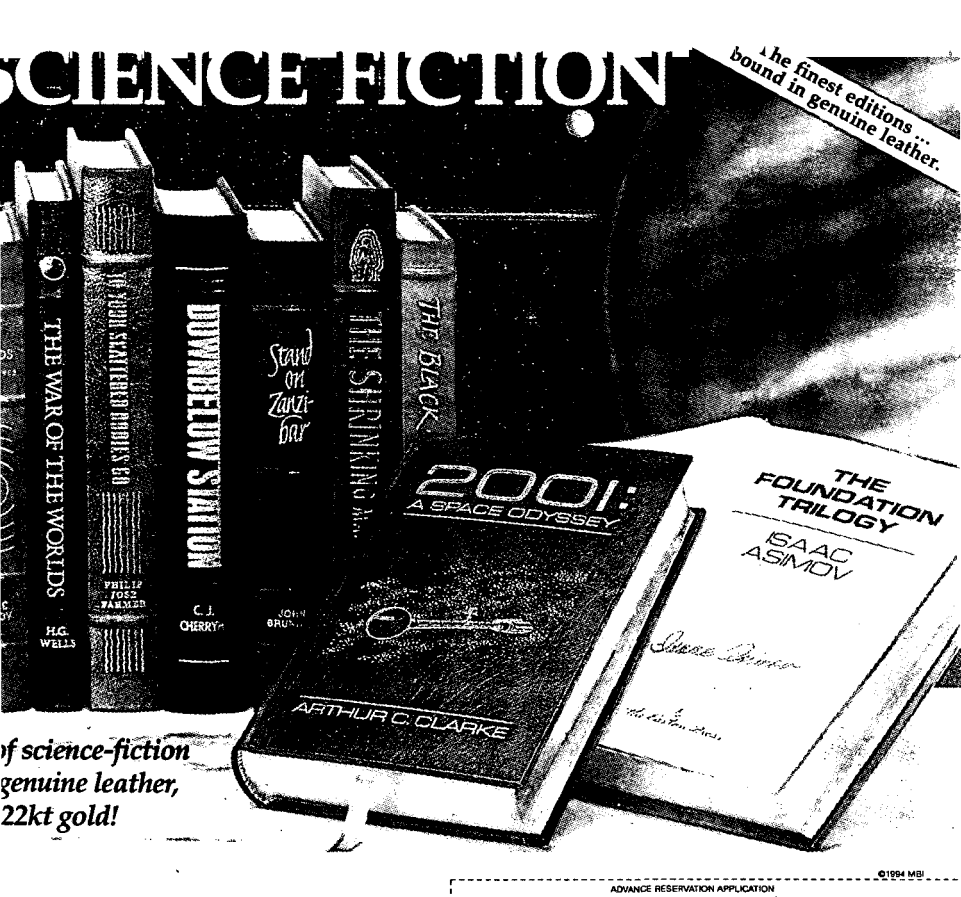

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ers of Gravity is in-depth offering for the lover of the written word. *PoG* talks with authors about various topics from religion to black holes, using the authors' works to illustrate and emphasize. The result is an entertaining analysis of the state of science fiction publishing, an examination of the trends and ideas which make up science fiction.

Which sounds, I know, stuffy and pseudo-intellectual like some PBS programs. But *PoG* is not stuffy. In fact, the show has a delightful sense of humor which is evident from its opening —staged as an interruption of a non-existent nature program called *Second Nature. (Second Nature* which we never get to see explores issues such as "Mind Readers and Psychics, don't they know how much we hate them?") *PoG*'s opening credits are the story of the show's fictional host, Commander Rick, as drawn by comic book artist, Ty Templeton. Best of all, the show features sf writers talking passionately about the things they care about, the issues which fill their work. On any given episode, you can see *F&SF* favorites from Esther M. Friesner to columnist Gregory Benford. The *PoG* staff heavily researches each topic, reading each featured book and short story, something rarely done in television journalism these days.

Fortunately, my local PBS station carries *Prisoners of Gravity*, so I get to see each program. I find that I learn a lot from the shows, and I enjoy them so much I never miss them. *Prisoners of Gravity* is worth recommending to your local PBS station.

I think we're lucky these days to have both these shows. Science fiction has become a force in its own right in the mainstream of our culture. It's nice to see some thoughtful television shows which reflect that change.

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Marcos Donnelly's short fiction publications in F&SF *and in the* Full Spectrum *anthology series from Bantam Books have received a great deal of critical attention. In fact, we have chosen the first story Marcos published with us ("The Resurrection of Alonso Quijana" March 1992) to appear in our new* Best from the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction *anthology (St. Martin's Press, October, 1994).*

He has just finished a wonderful novel titled Prophets of the End Time, *and has turned his attention back to short stories. "Bloodletting" is the first of several we have in our inventory.*

Bloodletting

By Marcos Donnelly

"WE'VE ALL BUT IGNORED the most arresting development of our century: the shift *away* from scientists crafting theories based on nature, *to* scientists pillaging nature for evidence of their favorite theories. Massive vector bosons, MACHO and WIMP dark matter...good Lord, gentlemen, could we please return to the essence of things?"

Dr. Henri Elobert
1992 Paper to *La Société*

"Blueshift," Kantell said as he looked up from the astroplot they'd prepared from last Christday's readings. He said it casually, as if saying "meteor shower" or "solar flare."

Tern looked angry. "Impossible! A supercluster that large and that far out — in blue*shift?"*

The dozen other heads in the room nodded. Of course it was impossible. They'd only just discovered this new supercluster, but no clusters so near the

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cosmic horizon blueshifted. Every major piece of the Universe was moving away from every other major piece. The cosmic rule of thumb was redshift.

But Ledeirsen came running into the room with astroplots from Bloodday observations, just last night.

"Another one," he said, out of breath. "There's another one."

She first comes to kill me out from a shadowed corner of my monastery cell. I know what she is — my own reaction tells me. I have been taught, again and again, that if one of the satans comes to steal off the soul of a sacerdote to a place in the Hells, that satan will attack the priest's weakness, his Most Grievous Inner Sin.

My Most Grievous Inner Sin is flesh lust, and she is beautiful.

She — no, *it*, for I must keep my wits — is guised as one of the women beyond the Holy Walls: long strings of black hair hanging from the open front of her hood, and the thick chest flesh tight against her umber robe. But I have readied myself for this, and I know to hate the tempter. I know enough to want to grab its throat and rip out its life in the Name of the Christ Son, first Believer in the Bloodletting for the Fatherhead.

The satan appears to me in year twenty-seven of Benedictus the Fifty-first, nine hundred and eighty-third Pope since Remus and the Christ Son together laid the cornerstone of Roma.

It draws its hood back, and I am struck by the satan's incarnation. Not exactly the form imagined in my Most Grievous Inner Sin, but enough to cause me to sway. Dark gray eyes, full hair and no signs of balding, unlike the men and women outside the Wall. Not a single blemish from the Curse.

And I hesitate. The woman-face the creature wears is sad. The Writs have spoken of voracity in satan eyes, and of licentiousness and Hell-light, but never of sadness. I hesitate because I believe I am seeing a new guise of the satans, as did St. Carlisle of Old, and I decide it might be important to discern the creature's full nature before ripping its throat. I have always performed special worship to St. Carlisle, and this unholy incarnation may be the Saint's way of repaying my devotion. The Saint is revealing to me a new class of satan, that I might win honor for my name and his.

Or perhaps the satan is striking at my pride, the second of my Most Grievous Inner Sins.

"Oh, Shirrah," the satan speaks, calling me by a name not mine. This is

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a good sign. If a satan speaks your name, you lose a portion of your spirit. "Your head," it says. "Your hands."

It looks at me piteously, seducing me into believing it sympathizes with the pains of the sacred Bloodletting. I have bored holes through my palms, completely through. Few sacerdotes have gone as far. The cuts in my head are not as deep as they could be, and I feel shame for a moment. But my hands are holy; I will kill it with my hands.

It walks past me to the window of my cell. I have still said nothing to it, because I cannot remember what Saint Carlisle had said to his new demon. But I should know! This satan confuses my mind, and I must fight to remember.

It is looking out the window, completely trusting that I will not attack it from behind. This, too, confuses me. The satans are not so careless. "The stars," it says, its voice low and bewildered. "The stars have never been this close. No time that I remember." It turns and faces me. There is a tear coming from one of its eyes, and I know now, for certain, that I am indeed blessed to cast down a guise of the satans so unique. Never have the Writs mentioned tears.

"You were right," it says. "No patterns, never a set amount of time. You knew, and now I do."

It pulls a dagger from beneath its robe. I have prepared myself against surprises, but I gasp nonetheless. She has turned so that starlight reflects from her right eye, the one without the tear. It is Hell-light, I realize. I begin a silent word ritual to St. Carlisle of Old.

She screams now. "You remember nothing after this? *Nothing*?" The hand with the dagger is shaking violently. This satan acts like a human, but speaks arcanely. A noble test from the Fatherhead. I am terrified.

The creature in woman-guise calms as suddenly as it exploded. "Oh Shirrah. It ends with your ignorance, just as it began with mine. Then go ahead! His start, my finish, and we remain dim-minded toward one another!"

She has yelled this last part, not at me, but out the window of my cell, as if to the very stars. But I do not take the time to ponder, for the words of Saint Carlisle come to me all at once. I recite them: "How could I have loved you when the Universe demands our blood?"

Ancient words, always a mystery to the Brotherhood of Sacerdotes. They strike the creature, confound it, and it lowers the dagger. I do not waste the

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moment. I lunge at it and grab its throat. My hands only appear to be weakened by the sacred Bloodletting; they are actually quite strong. The satan in my grip hardly struggles.

Before the creature's final gasp, I feel the sting in my side. Then the satan goes limp. There is blood, and I am confused. Satans, even in human-guise, have never bled, never shown sadness, never shed tears. But I see the blood is mine, then, and that her dagger's grip protrudes from my side. I laugh; it is an honor, a slashed side like the Christ Son. The laugh hurts, though, and I cannot breathe. I stumble over the creature's dead form, catch myself on the stone edge of the window.

Before I die, I see the stars. They are too large, many almost half the size of the moon.

The world is dissolving — not just my world, my life, but the entire world. And I cannot think why.

Kantell set down a stack of astroplots. On top was the latest: Blueshift No. 198 A.

"It can't be happening," Tern said. He'd been saying it for three days straight.

"It shouldn't be," Ledeirsen agreed, insistent. "There isn't enough matter in the Universe for a collapse. We've proved that. We've dispelled the dark-matter myth. Even with the MACHOs, the Universe is only at 23% capacity for a collapse. This can't *happen! It's that simple!"*

Kantell nodded toward the stack of astroplots. "I'm not the one you need to convince."

I AM RESTRAINED by a metal sheet, seated and feeling cramped. My head is clear, and I forget for a moment that I am dead. There is a grandiose room not made from stones, like nothing to which I am accustomed from thirty-seven years in cells behind the Holy Walls of Roma. This place is an abode for giants; "Nephilim" is the word I was taught.

My prison seat is elevated from the floor, the height of at least three good men. There is a giant across the great abode, standing the height of seven. A terror creeps through me, because I remember I have died, and with me all the world. This, then, must be the life after, and I have failed at the hands of a

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satan. I have been sent to one of the Hells.

One is not expected to retain dignity in the Hells; I scream without shame. The giant approaches; she has a huge, contorted face, a ballooned parody of the human facade. The face is as large as half my body, and I continue to scream, knowing the she-giant will consume me whole.

I silence myself — it is something about my scream, an unnatural shrieking like a bat or a maimed rodent. My body feels squat, like a dwarf. When I hold my hands before my eyes, I scream again, for the sacred holes are gone. No, not only the holes; the hands are gone, too. They are replaced by tiny things that only approximate hands, scrunched and wrinkled and no larger than a cat's paw. I have been betrayed! A sacerdote, the Writs have promised, may keep his wounds, even unto the deepest pit of the Hells, even to mock the satans with the victories of the Christ Son! Death has robbed me.

The demon-bitch has robbed me.

"Baby," the she-giant says. "Oh, poor baby. Come here." She lifts me without the least effort and sets me staring over her shoulder. "Poor baby," she says, patting me gently with a massive hand that could easily crush my spine. "My poor little Carlisle."

By the Sweet Wounds of the Christ Son, I curse to myself. This is no giant. *I am an infant!*

I am lulled to sleep by the gentle patting, and, as far as I can tell, I sleep for three dozen years.

When I awake, I am standing before a beautiful portrait of St. Carlisle of Old. The craftsmanship is unmatched, with the shades of the oils so delicately blended that the portrait has depth and dimension that are almost alive. It is St. Carlisle in his latter years; the artist has broken from convention by eliminating all the gray from Carlisle's beard. He has made the eyebrows much thicker than the standard portrayals. I do not care for the sagging, darkened skin under each eye, but I still find the Saint's humanity more compelling than any other portrayal I've seen.

I lurch backwards and lose a beat of my heart. I have knocked something over, and it falls with a tinny clatter; I do not bother to look to see what it is. For when I reached to touch the canvas and feel its quality, the canvas reached back for me. And when I lurched, the Saint also fell away deeper into the portrait.

Sweet Wounds. It is my reflection in a glass.

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There is a banging, and I feel firm hands on my shoulders. A voice with the strangest accent says, "Father Carlisle? Father Carlisle, are you all right?"

I turn and face him: a short man, fat from abundance that few ever see behind the Holy Walls of Roma. The room we are in is small, smaller even than my cell, but it is white and brightly lit. It feels very close in the room, and smells like cold, false incense. His hands are quite moist, and I realize I am naked but for the briefest of cloths covering my modesty. "Bernard," my voice says, in an accent quite like his own. And again, "Father Bernard."

He leads me from the room, into a darker passageway. Another man has taken my arm, and the two of them speak.

"What happened?"

"Another spell."

"A vision?"

The one named Bernard is slow to respond. "We'll ask him when he recovers."

I turn my head to see the second man. "Father Schramm," I say, and he nods.

"You'll be okay, Carlisle. You'll be fine."

"A vision, Father Schramm," I say, "A vision. Yes." For I begin to realize what is happening. This is all part of my translation to the life after. Devout to St. Carlisle, loyal to him only after the Fatherhead and the Christ Son, this has become my reward: to see St. Carlisle's world through the eyes of St. Carlisle. I have not been damned to the Hells after all. I have been blessed.

They take me to a room that is far too luxurious for a Saint. The bed is large enough for two and has three blankets and two sheaves of fine white linen. The walls are a bright blue, and portraits and landscapes hang on each of the four walls. There are other devices that I am sure represent wealth and power to some degree; I know that similar devices exist in my own time, outside the walls of Roma, the tools of scientists and governments. I do not claim to be a scholar of the age of Carlisle, and would not venture to guess the functions of these particular devices. Nor do I protest the luxury. It is not my place, for I am to watch the Saint from within.

They seat me on the edge of the bed. "This is just great, Schramm," the one named Bernard says. "The conference is in less than an hour. We can't take him in front of the College of Cardinals in this condition."

Father Schramm looks intimidated by the short, fat priest, and he keeps

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a hand on my back to steady me. "I'll never understand, Bernard," he says, his voice unsteady, "why a mystic would entrust himself to a pragmatist like you. You act as if you were his agent."

"I act like I'm his mother, and it's a good thing."

"My mother," I say, "was of the Nephilim." They both stare at me silently for a moment.

"Good God," Bernard mutters, and turns his back.

In an hour, I am before the College of Cardinals. The speech I am to give is written on thin, smooth parchment with the most painstakingly precise handwriting. The writing reminds me of the oldest copies of the Writs which are kept secure behind vaults in Roma. I once saw the oldest Writs, on the day I was ordained a sacerdote. They are shown once to all novices at ordination. A single holy glance provides the greatest indulgence of sin recognized by the Brotherhood.

But the words on the parchment before me are bland. They speak of vague universals like unity and peace. They say nothing of the personal call placed on each aspirant to the Presence of the Fatherhood. They say nothing of the temptation by the satans, or the Bloodletting.

I know what speech I am about to give. It is not this false one before me. As a novice I memorized Carlisle's *Homily to the World*, and I have at times recited it aloud in the emptiness of my cell, pretending myself to be the Saint. I had thought it pride, a manifestation of my second Most Grievous Inner Sin. Now I see it was practice for this day.

"The whole world watches?" I whisper the question to Father Bernard, who stands beside me for this homily. He smiles without heart and gestures to my left. When I look, I see only rows of metal boxes on iron legs, like malformed tabernacles touched by the Curse outside Roma's Walls. Behind the boxes, the forms of men are crouching, hiding their faces. Piety in the presence of the Saint, although a bizarre and primitive piety in my opinion.

The hall is vast, a sea of red garments. Beyond the red I see the darker costumes of other men. I surmise they represent the Separated Brethren, and that this is the day of the One-Church Unification. I know the legends.

"Today," I begin, and hesitate when my voice fills the entire hall and rolls back at me. "Today," I say again, adjusting to the noise my small lungs produce, "I have seen the guises of Satan in our world. This is to be a day of reunification of the divided Body of Christ. But I will not speak of brotherhood

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today. Pretending to be brothers cannot save us from the deceptions of the satans."

There is a murmur in the great hall, and the sound of flapping paper. Many of the Cardinals are looking down and reading parchment. Perhaps they have been given copies of Carlisle's intended speech, and are confused that the words do not match what I say. It is not inconceivable that so many copies could be made. The resources of this age appear limitless to me, and even a thousand scribes would not seem an absurd number.

But I will not give that false homily.

"Today," I continue to recite from memory, "Satan, many satans, circle above us in the guise of metal, threatening from the skies a rain of fire and death. Today, satans surround us on the Earth in the guise of flesh that craves flesh, in the guise of armies keeping peace, in the guise of unseeable monsters of man's own creation, invading our bodies in silent acts of war.

"Today, satans hide below our feet in the guise of two million demons of fire that can be launched in a single moment from Washington, Buenos Aires, Beijing" — I speak the names of the ancient Cities of Hate, but with a peculiar stress and pronunciation I have never used before — "Berlin, Jerusalem, Mexico City, and hundreds others, without the faintest cry of protest heard.

"I will not be your brother today. I will not claim to come from your stock. Your call for brotherhood is a farce, and many in this Hall of God are themselves no more than guises of satans. I see that in your finery, your bloated purses, and in your eyes."

There is a cry of protest from the hall, and again my head is swimming. There should be no protest. The Writs record in annotation to Carlisle's *Homily to the World*: "The crowds were humbled by the Saint's words, and submitted to the Bloodletting of the Fatherhead."

"Know today," I shout, "that the true believer is brother only to the Christ Son. Know that you do not bear His Name without bearing His Wounds." Then I dig my right index finger into my left palm, and the thrill gives me strength. My index finger snaps, but not before ripping flesh from the palm. I use the edge of bone to finish the hole, and bore through completely.

The pain is incredible. Burning and holy. I hold up my bloodied hand.

"*This*," I scream, for the crowd is now shouting, "is the only brotherhood

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with the Christ Son!"

The speech is ended, as far as the Writs record. The crowd is abusive, not conforming to the written history, but I do not care. I am enraptured in the holiness of the Wound. I turn to face Father Bernard, but he has left my side.

Suddenly the crowd before me is silent. I look over them, but they are not looking back to me, the Saint. They all seem to look toward the ceiling. I hear, then, the single note screeching above us, around us. They listen in fear, as if the sound were a trump of doom.

Then panic as I have never seen. Waves of red garments, dignity turned animal as the hundreds claw over one another toward exits from the hall. In the madness of the mob, one Cardinal grabs me. His eyes are so wide that his pupils seem lost in the surrounding whiteness. "How could you know?" he screams at me. "The bombs! The *bombs*! How could you see it coming?" Then he rushes into the mob again.

And *she* pushes through the mob, too, coming in the other direction. Toward me. She looks completely different, her hair short and her garments cut and fitted in various patterned pieces. Nevertheless, I recognize my satan. She is blocked for a moment by a Cardinal tardy in his flight from the hall, and she kicks him quite viciously to remove him from her path.

She is before me, but it is impossible. This is *my vision*, my blessing before death, and no satan can enter a blessed vision. She is a satan beyond my understanding.

"Bastard!" she yells, and she hits me across the face with something blunt and metal. I cry out and fall to the floor.

She swears at me again, and kicks my ribs. Vaguely, my eyes blurring and my cheek against the floor, I see the throng of red garments still clawing over itself to escape the hall. Several Cardinals lie motionless, crushed by the mob and tossed aside.

I reach for her foot, and when I catch it I twist until I hear cartilage cracking. She screams, and I pull her down.

"Bastard, bastard, bastard!" she yells, still beating on my head. I am forced to push her away.

"This is my vision," I cry. "You have no right to invade my death! This dream is holy!"

She is sobbing, and now beating the floor instead of me. "Holy," she manages to say between gasps of sorrow and pain. "There is nothing holy

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about us, Shirrah. We were both fools. How could I have loved you when the Universe demands our blood?"

I am shocked, then outraged. "Those words are mine, you demon-bitch. How dare you rob them from me? From the lips of Saint Carlisle himself?" I grab her hair, lift, and slam her face into the floor.

She looks up, her nose flat and bloodied. "What do you care?" she asks. "For you, love still approaches. For me, everything is past. How many more times? Just one, isn't it?" Then she swings the blunt metal she has used on me, and strikes the side of my head. I manage to strike her well one more time. Then the world explodes in white, and I die a second death. I believe I have killed her, too.

Near midnight of Woundsday, Ledeirsen crept into the central meeting room. "I have bad news," he whispered.

"That," muttered Tern, "would not be so very different."

"PN-239 E went into blueshift this morning." The room became very quiet. This wasn't a previously undiscovered supercluster, like the others. It was a known one, one already charted.

"You're certain?" Kantell asked, knowing, even as he said it, that the question was a stupid one.

I AM AN infant once again. I am shocked by the coldness of this infancy. There are bitter winds, frost falls from the very sky. The giant who is my mother here treats me roughly. She bundles me in a sack that covers to my neck, and tosses me over her shoulder. I am suspended there.

So, I am twice betrayed: once of my Wounds, once of my Vision. The demon-bitch follows me and robs me; this is a charade.

All my life, I have asked little of the Fatherhead. My first desire was to be in His presence, my second was to bleed righteously and often like the Christ Son. My outer sins have been negligible, and my Most Grievous Inner Sins have been carefully monitored. It has been sufficient. I have never begged for the honor of battle with one of the satans.

I sleep again, like the last time, and awake a young warrior. My body is covered with animal skins. I need them. The weather around me is colder than any winter in Roma. The frost even falls in frozen droplets from the sky.

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I refuse to pray to the Fatherhead for warmth.

Another warrior approaches me, even younger than I. I know that he is one of two hundred and twelve who follow my command. I counted the number just yesterday, although I am not consciously aware of any yesterday but infancy. Yesterday, I set pebbles on the ice for each man I counted. For weeks I had shown them how to approach for battle. I demonstrated how a strong center attack could divide an enemy into two forces, and how this division would weaken them. I taught them to circle behind enemies from both sides, enclosing them.

When I concentrate, I can remember all these things and much more. I am not just seeing this life from inside; I have lived it.

The young warrior who approaches me kneels and touches his head to the ice-ground. He carries a long wooden spear with an ivory head crafted to a point. The sword at his side is metal. His eyes are shaped like the ivory point of his spear, and the skin on his face is a brown darker than anyone inside of Roma.

Roma. I do not care to compare this place, this man, with Roma. This man is loyal to me. He is not like Father Bernard, who never trusted me as the Saint. No, this man would give his life at my word.

"They come, Larakhan. And they are led by a woman warrior, as you said."

"Yes," I agree. I remember having said it, although it feels for a moment I have not. But he is right. "Have the warriors span the ridge. You know what to do."

He runs off. I am amazed at his fleetness. Even his boots of black fur leave little impression on the snow. I am proud of this one. Very proud.

Oh, Fatherhead. Oh, Christ Son. What is this test? This game?

The two hundred and twelve are crouched silently below the edge of the ice ridge. I watch them, and I feel my body spasm with fear. Yes! I can feel her. I have developed a sense for the satan's presence; I know she is near.

My young warrior raises an arm to me, the signal that the enemy is within reach. I raise both my arms in response, and all two hundred and twelve watch me.

When I drop my arms, they raise a unison war cry that could frighten the very hosts of the Hells. They charge over the ridge.

I move forward slowly with measured strides, listening to the screams

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beyond the ice ridge. The battle is finished when I reach the top of the ridge. The enemy is partially surrendered, mostly slaughtered. The redness of their blood does not sully the snow much. Wounds freeze quickly in this temperature. My warrior reports two hundred and fifty enemies killed, twenty-two captured. Our force has lost seven.

"The woman?" I ask him, although I know he has followed orders. He points to the eastern side of the battlefield. Three of my men have stripped her naked, and are dragging her through the snow by her hair. Each time she struggles they strike her, but they are careful not to injure her beyond my command.

After three hundred paces of being dragged across ice, I allow her to stand before me. She can barely manage it.

I am not affected by her naked form, although it is no less pleasing to the flesh than her first appearance to me. And I feel no pride at having overcome her forces so easily. No, she has touched upon my third Most Grievous Inner Sin. She has brought forth my anger.

"Shirrah," she says weakly. She is shaking, and the cold will take her soon. "What has happened? Our pact, my love. Our agreement. We said only others from now on. Not ourselves. What about our love?"

Curious. She always speaks this way, as if I should have some knowledge I cannot reach, but which she expects of me.

"I no longer fear you, guise of satan," I say. "The Fatherhead will not accept my soul, and the Hells cannot seem to hold it. I have nothing left to fear."

"Shirrah?" Always that confused look, always that name. "Don't you remember? Has the journey stolen your memory?"

I roar at her. "Remember? God's Wounds, I remember! Twice you've slain me, you demon bitch, and I have no care of God, Christ, or Carlisle left to show you any patience! You suck me back through the history of this earth, and you slay me violently in two lifetimes! I'll have my share of violence as well."

"Slew you? But..." Her hands go to her mouth. "Back? *Back*, Shirrah? You've never told me —"

"When we've done battle, I've never had time to speak a word, you murdering whore! The time I give you now is far too lenient by your own standards." I raise my sword, and want nothing more than her blood.

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"But you never told me you are pulled back! I assumed...I only thought it was like me —"

I swing the sword, but she manages to say "I love you" before I have taken her life.

My men cheer, fanatics for the easy victory of their leader. But I am troubled by the corpse in the snow. The satans cannot love. They cannot speak the word aloud, even to lie to mortals. Such I have been taught. And such, despite my trials, I still believe. Yet she has said love to me today. And she said love when quoting the words of St. Carlisle.

What I have killed is no satan.

There is a commotion among my men. I turn to them, and their faces are toward the sky. Always the sky, I think, and I look myself. A sphere of flame is falling, some burning rock from heaven. I am not concerned, because death has already lost its novelty to me. Instead, I take the moments to ponder.

Each time she is both puzzled and puzzling. Each time her reactions follow no pattern I can discern. She reacts to situations in ways contrary to mine, almost directly opposed emotionally.

Backward.

And each time there is incredible death around us. This time, when the fiery meteor from the sky hits the earth, is no exception. The ground seems to buckle for a thousand miles.

Every star, star cluster, galaxy, and galactic cluster in the observable Universe was now in blueshift.

"Except one," Kantell announced.

Tern stood up from his own astroplots, daring a look of hope. "Which one?"

"Blueshift Number 1. The very first one we discovered."

Confusion. Then elation from Tern. "It's stopped! Sweet Blood of the Son, it's stopped!"

"No," said Kantell. "It's no longer visible. I believe it's approaching faster than its own light."

Tern was shaking his head. "But we would still see..." He said nothing else. There was no sense in arguing. Nothing was rational anymore.

"Blackshift Number 1," said Kantell.

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This time the infancy does not take me by surprise. Except for the desert warmth. More than pleasant after a life on the ice ridges.

Again I slumber after the initial awareness, and I awake an adolescent, much younger than my other incarnations. I laugh at myself, because I realize I have now taken on as many forms and guises as any of the satans could. In my first life I would have wasted time pondering the symbolism of that, but now I do not care. I have no faith in the Fatherhead any longer. That does not mean I do not believe there is a God. It simply means that I feel God has left Himself irrelevant to me.

Perhaps that is one of His Inner Sins, Most Grievous.

In this life I am named Shirrah. I believe I am Hittite, and that I first lived six thousand years from now. But I am going backwards through history, and my satan — who has called herself my love — is going forward. She does not yet know the tomorrows we will share, and I cannot yet grasp the yesterdays ahead of me. I search for her, because I know we must meet again and again in ignorance.

She is by a pool, preparing to bathe. The pool is man-made, surrounded by a score of layered-bark trees with sharp, drooping leaves. A channel of water runs to the pool from an oasis a hundred paces upland. Her family must be rich to afford such luxuries. But she is unattended by servants. Either they are only moderately rich, or she is a willful child to bathe alone.

I watch her disrobe; I am only faintly aware of vows I have made against indulging the flesh. Rather, vows I will make, six millennia from now, vows that died in the body of a loyal sacerdote way back then. Her form fascinates me, naked, dark, thin like the women outside Roma, but with small breasts. I do not know what it is that fixes my eyes on her breasts.

I do not want to embarrass her. I wait until she is done bathing and fully dressed before I approach.

"I am Shirrah, son of Terin the sheep grazer."

She is startled by my voice. When she jumps up, she grabs a rock twice the size of her hand.

"I deserve no less," I say quickly. "I have trespassed on your family land, and I have invaded your solitude. My life is yours."

She throws the stone at me and just misses my head.

"Perhaps if I move closer," I say, "killing me will be easier." I venture several paces across the sand, closer to her. She looks at me queerly.

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"I know you, Shirrah," she says, sounding as if she is not sure she believes it herself. She picks up another stone, and hurls it at my side. It hits.

"How do you know me?" I say while standing. My side is bruised, but I do not care. Even pain has begun to bore me. "Have you heard me calling you across the millennia?" I mean the future when I say it, but I believe she is pondering her past. She does not reach for any more stones.

"You killed me," she says, looking amazed that she has remembered. But I know she is not talking about her future. She is talking about what I will still do in mine. "But then I killed you back. Twice." I cannot tell if the pride I hear in her voice is due to her being able to remember, or due to her out-killing me two to one. I do not even care. That she recognizes me is enough. I bow to her — it is anachronistic, a gesture I acquired in my previous incarnation — and leave her.

Her name is Selah, for what that is worth.

Over the next few months we fall in love. We set no times to meet, but always do. We sense when we need one another. I assist my father in the tending of sheep, but during the long days in the sun I find myself longing for my woman-guised satan. I have never been physically intimate with a woman in any of my incarnations; never married, never in love. The sacerdotes of Roma were wrong: lust is not as far removed from love as they supposed.

But neither is it far removed from violence. It is a pall over me that in her next incarnation, Selah will die under my sword. I try not to think of it, but it is impossible. I cannot bring myself to tell her.

At times, during our lovemaking, I tell her to dig her fingernails deep into my flesh. When she draws blood, we experience an ecstasy that matches the white blazes of destruction in each of my previous guises. She asks me to explain the effect, but I pretend ignorance. It would reveal too much to her about the violence — about the history of the world ahead, and our history besides.

"Being human has changed us," she says to me one day. We lie naked by the pond; I have been running my hand over the smooth skin of her back.

"What do you mean?" I ask. I never inquire about our past, for she has always assumed I know what she knows.

"I mean, before we took this form we fought mindlessly. I never understood why we attacked. What the battle was for. But being human has

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given us reason beyond what we've known before. Being able to touch...I think that changes everything." She leans toward me and kisses me.

I am ashamed of the future. "Maybe being human isn't all that different."

"But it is!" she insists, sitting upright. "Being able to touch you has changed how I feel. I don't understand you, but I feel who you are. We should swear never to harm one another again, Shirrah."

I lower my eyes to the pool beside us. "It is never that simple," I whisper. "Things do not follow such neat paths. There are no reliable patterns, no set times."

She grabs my shoulders and forces me to look at her. "Swear to me! Swear to me by our love that we will never harm each other again!"

I shake with fury. With helplessness. How can I promise to never do what I have already done in the coming centuries? "All right!" I yell. "I swear! I swear by our love!" And then I grab her in a furious kiss. Our bodies come together like those of animals, and she digs at my flesh. I dig at hers as well. We are both bloodied.

She looks up in the middle of our passion. "If we must kill, Shirrah, then let it be others! Never ourselves again. Now that we are human, never ourselves!"

I swear it to her. The sky becomes dark as our lovemaking turns more primitive. Our bleeding brings the rains, but we do not stop the joining.

I realize that for the first time since I left the life in Roma, I do not want to die. Not because I fear death or the Hells. Because I am with her, for the first time, without hatred. Leaving me now, she will move forward to a life in which I strip her, drag her over ice, and slice her throat for revenge.

But Christ Son! How could I have known? How could any man have guessed it? I cannot be held responsible for the sins I commit in her future, because I jump through lives in reverse of history, like a stone skipped across the surface of an incoming tide.

Tides. The water falls from above us like no other rain I have experienced. We are floating now, and growing more vicious in our passion.

This is the Great Flood of Old, as related in the Sacred Writs.

I push her from me and scream to her against the howling of the wind.

"Gather an army!" I yell. A wild, erratic current is pulling us away from one another. I swim back toward her.

"What did you say?" she yells back.

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"An army! When you come to the land of ice in our next lives, you must surround yourself with an army! Never trust me! Never!"

"Yes!" she shouts, and then follows it with something I cannot hear. I force myself closer, and she says, "We will fight with the lives of other men! We will never harm one another again —"

"Never trust!" I insist, but I cannot get back to her. With the current separating us, I cannot even see her now.

I am sinking beneath the water, beating madly against the waves in violent despair. My warnings to her are useless, for I have already sealed her future. Only death after death are ahead for her.

The flood takes me. I am not certain how much of the Earth our passion has destroyed this time.

Tern had come to the lab drunk. The rest of the team was too courteous, too understanding to comment on it.

"You know what I was thinking last night?" he said to no one in particular. "I was thinking, 'Alpha and Beta Centauri.' That's what I was thinking. I used to complain about how far away they were." He laughed, and the last laugh was a sob. "How very far away they were."

Ledeirsen cataloged Blackshift No. 498.

WHAT I am now is no infant. There is life, but there is darkness; not any darkness to which I am accustomed, for it is warm, it is mobile and diverse. I can feel myself growing, dividing into two, both of me growing more, dividing, then again and again, endlessly. I feel the sun, but I can see nothing. I try to judge the passing of years by the warming of day and the cooling of night, but I soon lose interest. The years do not concern me. I must absorb everywhere, internalize and process to survive. I must grow and divide, and spread myself over spaces I cannot see.

I cannot find her. She is not in this age of the Earth.

I do not want to miss her when she comes. I continue to force my growth, and after several millennia I encircle half the face of the planet.

After a million years, I have sent parts of me over the great rocks that rise up from where I grow. Thousands of bits of me are over all the globe, and I wish I had one voice with which to laugh. Because I realize I am the very life of the

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planet. In my search for her, I have carried life everywhere. *What to say, then, Fatherhead? I am what You will bleed for, just me! I was a fool to bleed myself for You, because I am, I have always been, the source of my own life. You are the alien! An impostor! When You claimed my life as a sacerdote, I was a foolish peasant deceived by a tyrant.*

I feel her suddenly, at my head and at my feet. She has appeared without warning, and I can sense she has noticed me and is terrified.

She tears my feet and dissolves my head. Millions of bits of me die in a coldness she controls, and she is moving on me from below and above.

I have no way to stop her. She is not really a life, she is freeze and motion. I cannot scream to her, I cannot say I love her. I can only retreat.

If I find no way to stop her, the entire world will be swallowed in her ice.

So I let her take parts of me. Many parts. But I concentrate most of my life in one spot, a tight ball of survival. I rest the ball in the midst of mountains, but I hesitate. That area repulses me; I know where it is, and I have tried to settle there by instinct, a wounded animal crawling its way home. The area is Roma, or at least parts of what will be Roma in millions of years. I abandon the spot; let Christ Son and Remus lay its foundations. I will have no part of the place.

I move away, downward. She still follows, destroying with her ice any residue I leave behind. Finally I center again, far south of Roma. She knows that I still live, and she will take this place too unless I leave. So I experiment. I separate gently from one of the smallest parts of me. I pull back without destroying it. It is dazed for a moment, if that is what such a small bit of matter feels when it is left alone to live. And it *does* live. It has a life of its own, manufactured from the bits of matter this planet has provided. It functions.

I continue the process, piece by piece, pulling myself into a tighter ball and leaving behind the growths that were me before I abandoned them. Many cease to function, but some continue to live. She, as ice, watches the process, and halts her advance. I have puzzled her.

Most of me is contained now in a cluster that is smaller than I have been in eons. I send a tendril north, a thin, connected line of matter that almost touches the farthest advance of her ice. Then I begin to erase myself from behind me, moving up piece by piece until I am contained, as when I started this incarnation, in a single bit of matter.

She senses that I am fully there. I am tired from the exertion, but mostly

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I am lonely. I have left an enclave of life behind me in the south, but it is little comfort. It is not me, not really.

She still has hate. The barest finger of cold touches my side, and I begin to rupture. Then the ice envelopes me, and the blackness of this incarnation returns again to white.

Tern did not show up for observations the next evening. Ledeirsen offered to call him.

Kantell told him not to.

The next seems so short. The last one, in which a millennium was a day, has spoiled me for longer existences. I become aware and sense her already here. We are, in fact, melded together.

We are a molten ball, the Earth before it was yet Earth. Above us the sun is pure whiteness, a mass still young itself.

Her fear is tremendous, and she pushes me away. But since we are one, the effort is a strange one.

Why? Why did you do that to me?

Her essence is mine, although we are still two in awareness.

I do not know what I did, I tell her.

Liar! The deception and the violence of it! She is still pushing me.

I have done you violence, I agree. But you have been violent with me as well.

I've done nothing to you. But I will, I swear! I'll hurt you now, and again and forever if you continue to hurt me. I trusted you, but I'll never again make that mistake.

She pushes, and I do all I can to cling to her. I could never explain. How could I ever make her see that in just a few billion years we will be lovers?

At last her pushing succeeds, and I am trapped in a small ball of molten rock that hurls away from her. The separation is more than I can tolerate. I love her! I would die for her and bear her pain, just as once I bore the Bloodletting for love of the Christ Son. I can no longer live without what she is, and my awareness drains from the free floating rock in which she has imprisoned me.

I manage to throw my corpse into orbit around her before awareness is lost completely.

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They were saved from the Centauri. The disruption of the stars' own gravitational balance sucked them into one another. Half the evening sky was ablaze with the resulting novae.

"A brief abeyance," Kantell said. He and Ledeirsen were outside, eyes fixed on the heavens.

"My God, it's quiet," Ledeirsen said. "It looks violent, but it's so quiet."

"Isn't it beautiful?" said Kantell.

And completely still.

And more so.

Until the very nothingness is itself an awareness. I am All That Is Not.

A peculiar state. I will not describe it in words, except to say that there is no Time yet; not blackness, but the Black. That is what I...AM. The Black.

"What is this thing, the 'Making' you dream of?"

It is she. I can barely sense her, for she is beyond whatever line keeps her apart from the Black. Somehow she has crossed that line, something I do not know how to do.

"What is 'Making'?" she repeats.

I have nothing with which to let her know, so I find where she is crossing. The light is tremendous, and I feel what blackness is for the first time in infinite no-Time.

She is All That Is. I steal the smallest portion of her essence and draw it into myself. I fashion and mold and make me a Man. I begin by forming the likeness of Shirrah, but I do not have the will to create the one facsimile of me she has loved. Instead I build the first of me, the naive sacerdote.

I stand him before where she calls, and use him to speak.

"This is a Making."

She is silent. With the eyes of the sacerdote I see her as a ball of white fire, endless in herself and defining all that is by her Being. She is ignorant of the Time and Forms of what will be.

She speaks at last. "You hurt me when you did that."

"Yes," my sacerdote nods. "The hurt is part of Making. It is the cost."

She does not understand "cost."

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"It is...as it should be. It is right."

Again she falls silent. I take another part of her. I fashion the visage I had first called a satan. I stand the female beside my sacerdote.

"You have hurt me again."

"Speak through the woman," I direct.

"Through what?"

"The other Making."

Through the sacerdote, I watch life come into the eyes of the bit of All I have fashioned. The memories hurt me for a moment, my first death and the betrayal I imagined. But she, through the woman, feels nothing like these things, for she has never Been. She simply Is.

Through the woman's eyes, she examines the hands I have made for her. "Why does this intrigue you? It hurts me a great deal, and I find no particular pleasure in it."

"I'm sorry I've hurt you. There can only be Making through violence. It is that way, because that is as it should be."

"I am All That Is. I know nothing of your Making or your violence. How can the Void presume to teach me about what should be?"

"These," I say, indicating the two Makings, "are not only part of All That Is, but part of all that will come. I do not mean to rob you of any part of Being, but I fashion them for your knowledge. Take them and preserve their forms. Lock them safely in the All. They are your rightful essence, but the Making is my gift to you."

The forms disappear, and I am again alone as the Black, for a measure that is not in Time, for I have no Time and Time is not yet.

Again she calls me. "I have studied your gifts, and I have preserved them in the All as you requested. But I do not understand your curiosity for them."

I feel the touch of the All from which she speaks to me. I crave it, long for it. I love her.

"You must keep the Makings safe, no matter what happens."

"They are in the All. What do you mean by 'happens?'"

Yes, what is 'happens'? 'Happens' is something I do not experience as the Black. Nor does she experience it as the All. There is no Universe because alone, the All separated from the Black, there is no 'happens.'

"Surround me," I say, "and you will know 'happens.'"

"What do I do?"

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"Surround me. Envelop the Black on all sides and draw it into you."

"This is how I understand 'happens?'"

I hesitate. "Yes."

Then she is around me everywhere. I have definition, for my nothingness touches forever walls of the All. It is painful to my awareness. I really am quite Nothing.

"Now explain 'happens,'" she says.

And I empty, fully, throughout the All. She screams from the agony, and the violence mixes us, pieces of the Black and shattered fragments of the All, spewing...out. I remember 'out,' a spatial function of the All. She is screaming still, and I know that the anguish I feel in my scattered nothingness could only be a fraction of what she feels as the scattered All. But I am justified! If I had not entered the All, then there would never have been a 'happens' or a 'Makings'! There would never have been an 'Ever'! Even here, at the beginnings of the Universe, the violence is primary to Being. So despite the deception, despite pain as vast as the Universe we form, *it was necessary!*

No wonder she has hated me since before time began.

Kantell appeared at the laboratory dressed in his evening cloak and carrying the contents of his emptied desk in a small cardboard carton.

"Gentlemen, I am leaving you. I wish each of you the best."

"Now!" gasped Ledeirsen. "You're just going to leave!"

"Of course. I have a very loving wife at home, and an adoring daughter. I should like to spend some time with them. I should like to know them a little better."

He turned to leave. No one said anything else to stop him. "And I believe," he said without turning back, "I shall call on Dr. Tern and share a drink with him."

My hands clutch the cold of gray stone on the window ledge. By instinct I reach down and pull the dagger from my side. There is pain. But it is nothing like real pain, the pain of becoming a Universe.

I examine my side. There is no wound where the knife had been. Neither are there holes bored through my palms, though I am the sacerdote. Bloodletting is over for me, along with all its maiming evidences.

I hear her coughing, and the shuffle of her standing up. "The trouble with

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human forms," she says before I even turn to face her, "is that yours is always considerably stronger than mine."

I say nothing. The sheer wonder of being in a form, a solid form that is all me inside and not at all me outside, keeps me silent. I have not felt a form so itself, so fully contained, since I was Shirrah.

"At first, during this life," she says, "I was unclear of the beginning. But as I grew into this form, I remembered more. This is the form of your Making. It helped me remember." She smiles — a human smile! It has been ages — and she asks, "Do you remember now?"

I nod, but very slowly. "Still," I say, "these forms had...died."

She laughs, as if I am now the ignorant one. "These forms cannot die, not until the All of Making itself dies." She crosses the room and sets a hand on my shoulder. Her gaze goes past me, out the window. "Of course, that will be very soon."

I look where she is looking, and I remember what she had said several minutes, the age of the Universe, ago. That the stars were bigger than she had ever seen them. It is true.

"I love you," I say, and she smiles. She sets her hand gently on top of mine. I sense it: the need for violence is gone, now that the Making is coming to an end. We stand, side by side, leaning against one another. We are silent at the window, the stone ledge cold on our forearms but our shoulders warm from each other's touch. Together we watch the stars come home to us.

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BOOKS

JOHN KESSEL

GROWING UP, THE HARD WAY

Glimpses, by Lewis Shiner, Morrow, cloth, 1993.

SHORT TAKES: *Off the Wall at Callahan's, Hugo and Nebula Anthology 1993, Expert Astronomer*

LEWIS Shiner's career has been arcing away from science fiction for some time now. Even in the early '80s, when as "Sue Denim" he was one of the mainstays of the cyberpunk critical flyer *Cheap Truth*, I wondered whether Shiner's alliance with Bruce Sterling and William Gibson was more than one of convenience. Sterling is known as an idea man and Gibson has made waves as a postmodern stylist. Shiner is primarily an observer of contemporary American life. He has always focused on character more than extrapolation. Even his most science fictional novel, *Frontera*, about geopolitical rivalries and the colonization of Mars, relies more on the interactions of the characters than it does on Gibsonian crammed prose or Sterling-like extrapolation, and in a traditional literary way it makes allusions to the Jason legend from Greek mythology. In his succeeding novels *Deserted Cities of the Heart* and *Slam*, Shiner moved farther still from the C-word.

The Shiner of these novels is distanced and ironic. He has strong convictions, but he conceals them behind a screen of hipness, in an increasingly detached third person voice. *Slam* is perhaps Shiner's most extreme move toward this postmodern style. Cool, ironic, detached, economical, episodic, almost offhand but with a beautifully dovetailed plot, it is his closest approach to Don DeLillo or Raymond Carver. Although it's full of wacky elements from UFO cults to nihilist skate-

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boarders, it contains no science fiction or fantasy.

With *Glimpses*, Shiner moves a quarter step back toward fantasy and a large step closer toward the personal, away from irony.

Ray Shackleford, an ex-musician who runs a stereo repair business out of his home, is undergoing what amounts to a midlife crisis. His eleven-year marriage to his wife Elizabeth has become a stale and frustrating battle of nerves. Ray and Elizabeth want different things from each other, are unable to change, and can hardly articulate what the problem is. Ray's father, with whom he had a terrible relationship, has died in a scuba diving accident. Ray is pushing forty and has nothing much to show for his life. He repairs old stereo receivers, listens to old rock music, dreams about old girlfriends and wonders where his life went wrong.

One day in the course of one of these daydreams he discovers he has the ability, by visualizing recording sessions that never occurred, to recapture on tape what might be called the music of an alternative history. His first success is a version of the Beatles' "The Long and Winding Road" without the overproduction under which, in the real world, record producer Phil Spector buried it. As a result of his psychic bootleg Ray gets hooked up with an L.A. record producer and launches into attempts to recover lost or never-recorded music by Jim Morrison, Brian Wilson, and Jimi Hendrix.

Glimpses uses this fantasy premise in a story of self exploration on two levels. In the present Ray's marriage dissolves, he fights a drinking problem, hunts for the truth about whether his father died accidentally or on purpose, threatens to fall in love with another woman, and reassesses his relationship with his mother. In the past, to which he eventually discovers he can physically transport himself, he undergoes a series of increasingly desperate and debilitating encounters with Morrison, Wilson and Hendrix. The three rock icons represent different aspects of Ray's personality. All fought against their fathers. All abused drugs and alcohol. All struggled to create music that, while exorcising their own demons, would change the world.

The three have different ways of reacting to their troubled histories and the troubled world. Morrison adopts the pose of the Lizard King, self destructive, exploiting others, despairing, alcoholic and suicidal. Wilson is the holy innocent, naive, brilliant, fragile, under continual threat of being destroyed by the

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world's takers. He is a more positive figure than Morrison, and his music offers life instead of death, but both are overwhelmed by their circumstances.

Hendrix has some of the darkness of Morrison and the lightness of Wilson, but unlike them he, at least potentially, has the strength to cope with the forces his talent unleashes. His music also has the potential to build bridges, fuse black and white, male and female, soul and rock and jazz. Shiner portrays Hendrix's death, unlike Morrison's death or Wilson's mental breakdown, not as the inevitable result of a downward slide but as a tragic, arbitrary accident.

You've probably caught on by now to the fact that Lew Shiner loves rock and roll. *Glimpses* assumes that rock is important, and if you don't think it is or ought to be, then you'll get impatient with this book. Shiner is very knowledgeable about music and musicians, and offers intriguing portraits of the self-hating Jim Morrison and the childlike genius Brian Wilson. His Jimi Hendrix is even more mysterious, a combination of totem and vulnerable human being.

Morrison, Wilson and Hendrix also represent the weaknesses and strengths of the '60s generation of which Ray is an example. In too many cases, the promise of their idealistic youth was never fulfilled. Why have so many of the Woodstock generation never accomplished what they set out to? Why have so many abandoned the things they believed in in 1968? Why have so many gotten older but not grown up?

In raising these questions *Glimpses* becomes a novel about a man who has never really escaped the '60s and a generation that reveres that time perhaps too much. Were the '60s special, or is that a self-indulgent delusion? Can the past be recovered?

The idea of "recovery" informs everything that happens to Ray. Even the time travel in this novel can be seen to correspond to the psychological notion of recovery. To finally grow up an individual must go back and figure out what went wrong in his youth, try to correct it. Not only that, the process of Ray going back to meet these '60s characters is like the author going back to write about them. Both involve research, recapturing a mindset, projecting alternative possibilities.

The psychological quest aspect of *Glimpses* leads to a potential problem: it's easy to get impatient with Ray. An unsympathetic reader will view him as sentimental, self-involved, lacking force of character,

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unable to make a decision either to rebel or to conform. At forty, Ray's still fighting adolescent battles. His parents' generation would say, "Grow up! It's not a fantasy you're living in. Life isn't perfect." A contemporary might gently remind Ray that Brian Wilson's "Wouldn't It Be Nice" is a utopian pop song, not an accurate description of what happens when you get married. Members of Generation X would say, "Give me a break. Don't you boomers ever think about anything but yourselves?"

To be fair, Shiner recognizes Ray's deficiencies, and has various characters take him to task for them. And perhaps the feeling that *Gilmpses* is a little too easy on Ray is simply the result of Shiner's choice of viewpoint. Unlike his earlier novels, *Glimpses* is written in the first person, alternating past and present tense. It reads almost like a diary. As a result we are very close to Ray Shackleford, and get little of the ironic distance with which Shiner treated his previous protagonists. But if the downside of this choice is the risk of self-involvement, the upside is an intensity of emotion and a sincerity that I haven't seen before in a Shiner novel. In many ways this is a courageous book.

The best part of it is its conclusion, which is less predictable, and less conclusive, than one might expect. Which tragedies are accident and which are suicide? Can a death, even an accidental one, be undone? I won't tell you whether the past can be recovered in this book, or if it can, to what degree. *Glimpses* is provocatively ambiguous on some of these issues.

Where does *Glimpses* leave Shiner as a novelist? Well, it's most definitely not a science fiction book. And it's not the kind of fantasy that is going to appeal to most fantasy fans. But having started his career in science fiction, Shiner may have trouble reaching the non-SF audience. Where it would have been safe for him to pursue a career as an SF writer by offering up more of the same after *Frontera*, instead Lew Shiner has hurled his body into the chasm between the genre and the mainstream. I hope he, and this good book, don't expire there.

Short Takes:

Off the Wall at Callahan's, by Spider Robinson, Tor, paper, 1994, 128 pp. $9.95

Off the Wall at Callahan's is a collection of aphorisms, puns, bits of conversation and songs that originally appeared in Spider Robinson's

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"Callahan's Place" stories. It is consciously modeled after Robert A. Heinlein's cranky observations on society and politics as collected in *The Notebooks of Lazarus Long.*

I can't think of any other world but that of SF and fantasy where a fiction writer can have a book of maxims published as if his characters were speakers of holy writ. You can't buy *Travis McGee's Guide to Living* or *The Gospel According to Philip Marlowe.* We don't see *Quotations from Chairman F. Scott Fitzgerald* or *Bible Leaves from Moby Dick.* Even the cult followings of writers such as Ernest Hemingway or D. H. Lawrence haven't produced *The Wit and Wisdom of Papa Hemingway* or *Lawrence's Rules of Sexual Order.*

I'm not sure why this is. Are SF readers so much in search of role models? Some of the sayings in *Off the Wall at Callahan's* are amusing, some are thought provoking, some are sentimental and a lot are smug. In general, the prospect of an sf writer quoting himself as if he were Chairman Mao strikes me as a bad idea.

The saying attributed to "Larry Van Cott" on page 45 was, according to James Charlton's *The Writer's Quotation Book* (1980), originally said by Gene Fowler.

Hugo and Nebula Anthology 1993, ed. by Brad Templeton, ClariNet Communications Corp., 1993. $29.95

ClariNet Communications, with the help of Brad Templeton, has produced this huge CD-ROM anthology. It contains a vast amount of information, including the text of the Hugo nominated novels *Doomsday Book*, by Connie Willis, *A Fire Upon the Deep* by Vernor Vinge, *China Mountain Zhang* by Maureen McHugh, *Red Mars* by Kim Stanley Robinson, and *Steel Beach* by John Varley, plus all the Hugo and Nebula nominated short fiction and portfolios of Hugo nominated art. There are fan writing and fanzines, information on conventions and SF, media, jokes—you name it.

The hypertext version of Vinge's novel included here would not run on my Macintosh Centris 610, nor did the quicktime videos of the authors. I'm told the PC-compatible version doesn't have these bugs.

I question whether many people are going to want to read a 600-page novel on a computer screen. But ClariNet points out that reading these works on a portable computer offers some real advantages. And I do think there are computer fans who will enjoy this. Without a question you get an awful lot of worthwhile mate-

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rial for the money. Though the days of the electronic book may still be a little in the future, this anthology brings us somewhat closer.

Available from ClariNet Communications Corp., 4880 Stevens Creek Blvd, #206, San Jose, CA 95129

Expert Astronomer, Expert Software, 1992.

This is a marvelous program for the Macintosh. It provides a huge database of stellar and planetary positions and information, over 9,000 celestial objects. Essentially, *Expert Astronomer* gives you the entire solar system on disk. The program can take you anywhere in the solar system, show you starfields from any perspective or time. Click on any star and you get a complete description including name, Yale catalog designation, magnitude, spectral type, distance in light years, parallax, right ascension and declination, ecliptic and galactic latitude and longitude, and rising and setting time for any date and location of Earth's surface. You want to know what the sky looked like from Cairo on November 15, 532 A.D. at 6:15 P.M.? You want to know what the sky looks like as you hover 50,000 kilometers above the dark side of Neptune on December 20, 1993? *Expert Astronomer* can show you these things, and you can print them out for future reference.

Anyone interested in astronomy will love this product. If I had had this available to me as an undergraduate astronomy major 25 years ago, I would have disappeared for six months and never come up.

Available from Expert Software, PO Box 144506-4506, Coral Gables, FL 33114-4506.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Finder by Emma Bull, Tor Books, February 1994; 320pp; $21.95.

Nevernever by Will Shetterly, P.J.F., Jane Yolen Books/Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993; 226pp; $16.95.

THE CITY of Bordertown was created a few years ago by Terri Windling and Mark Alan Arnold, although Arnold's involvement with it seems to have ended with the first collection of Borderland stories, *Borderland* (Signet, 1986). In the author's note to a Borderland story of my own called *Berlin* (Fourth Avenue Press, 1989), I described the concept this way?

"Fifty years from now, Elfland came back.

"It stuck a finger into a large city, creating a borderland between our world and that glittering realm with its elves and magic. As the years went by the two worlds remained separate, co-existing only in that place where magic and reality overlap. A place called Bordertown."

I've had the chance to play in its streets as a writer, but I think I've enjoyed reading the stories that others have set in its streets even more. People like Bellamy Bach and Midori Snyder. Emma Bull and Will Shetterly. And I'm not alone in my enjoyment of these writers' work in this series. Bordertown seems to appeal to a wide spectrum of readers — as diverse a range as child rights activist/lawyer/author Andrew Vachss to the fourteen-year-old I overheard enthusiastically expounding on it in my local sf book store recently.

A year or so ago what was once a series of anthologies, with the stories written by various authors, has become a series of novels penned by a pair of Minneapolis writers, Emma Bull and Will Shetterly.

The Borderlands setting, elves and magical ability of her protagonist narrator Orient notwithstanding, I'd be hard put to call Emma Bull's *Finder* a fantasy. Orient can "find" things — people, objects, whatever, just so long

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as he knows what it is that he's looking for. When a Bordertown police detective named Sunny Rico brings Orient in on a homicide case with ties to a new drug that's hit the city, Orient becomes Rico's reluctant partner in the best tradition of P.I. novels.

The drug supposedly changes humans into elves, making it possible for them to cross over into Elfland. What it actually does is kill humans with the added side effect of waking a hitherto unknown virus in Bordertown that can be fatal to elves. The death count rises rapidly — as much from the drug as from various murders — as Orient and Rico get closer to the source of the drug.

From the brief description above you might be wondering how I can think of this as anything but a fantasy. I'll grant that *Finder* has all the outward trappings, but what it lacks is a sense of mythic resonance underpinning the various events and characters. It's true that without the magical elements (Orient's ability to find things, the elves, various small ambush and locking spells, etc.) there wouldn't be much story, but the way Bull presents them they might as well be real world elements. The elves could easily be part of any culture unfamiliar to the protagonist. Ditto the growing racial tension that grips the city. The magical drug/virus could as easily be any serious addiction/influenza epidemic.

Rather than tapping into some mythological subconscious that allows the mysteries of humanity's interior landscape to take center stage, and so illuminate the connections between myth and what lies inside us, the magical elements in *Finder* are stand-ins for external problems that exist in our own world. All of which isn't meant as criticism — merely an observation.

For *Finder* is a great success on its own terms. It has the shape and plot structure of a mystery novel — the best kind, for once started, the novel's hard to put down. Bull has done a tremendous job at capturing the sense of urgency that grips her characters. Her protagonist's wry observations of the world around him work for the same reason that readers are so taken with the work of Chandler and the like, while the rest of the cast are well-drawn, fully realized characters. Bull also proves to have mastered the art of mixing those light touches with the novel's more serious concerns so that the reader remains engaged with the ravages of racism, viruses and unhappy childhoods that plague the principal characters, but still has a chance to come up for air.

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So whether or not it reads like a fantasy is irrelevant.

Will Shetterly's Borderland novels are more traditional fare — at least in terms of how they use fantasy. In *Elsewhere* (Jane Yolen Books, 1991) Shetterly introduced us to his first-person protagonist, a human runaway named variously Ron, Just Ron, and Gone until he becomes the recipient of an elvish curse and is turned into a teenage werewolf, forever trapped in his half-human, half-lupine shape and unable to converse except by writing and sign language. Now he's known as Wolfboy or Lobo.

Nevernever finds Wolfboy once again protecting Florida, the hidden heir of Faerie who appears, to all intents and purposes, to be just one more elfin runaway trying to make do on the streets of Bordertown. Things get complicated, as one would hope and expect in a story of novel length, and Wolfboy's extended family of friends are soon involved in hiding Florida, trying to rescue her when she gets kidnaped, not to mention also having to clear the name of one of their company when he's arrested for murder. Because of the latter event, Orient and Sunny Rico from Bull's *Finder* make an extended visit into the proceedings and perhaps I should warn you that if you're planning to read both books, read Shetterly's first.

Parts of *Nevernever* were published separately as short stories, so in addition to the above mentioned plotlines, Wolfboy also finds himself given the chance to take his revenge on Leda, the elf who originally cursed him with his wolfish shape. This is where we enter the Nevernever of the book's title — the actual Borderlands between our world and Faerie where the landscape shifts and changes so that one's never quite sure where one is, or how long it will take to get from one point to another.

As to what happens when Wolfboy lures Leda into the Nevernever, well, I don't want to spoil any surprises so I'll just say that Shetterly pulls all the various plot threads together for a satisfactory, if somewhat bittersweet ending. Magic plays a much more traditional role in his novel, but he uses it inventively, with a real sense of mythic resonance underlying the characters' actions and motives. *Nevernever* is marketed as a YA book, but Shetterly doesn't write down to that projected readership. Fantasy lovers of all ages will enjoy his take on the hybrid inhabitants of Bordertown and environs.

An aside: For those of you wondering what the P.J.F. following Shetterly's by-line means — initials also found following the by-lines of

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Gumshoe in a Brave New World

GUN, with occasional MUSIC

by JONATHAN LETHEM

"Jonathan Lethem has created a **TOUR DE FORCE,** a blending of speculative and noir fiction that is by turns satirical, witty, tough, and profound."
—*Lucius Shepard, author of "Life During Wartime"*

"By turns **FUNNY** and **FEROCIOUS.** The Last Good Man struggles heroically to survive in a noir world getting darker by the minute."
—*Kim Stanley Robinson, author of "Red Mars"*

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Steven Brust, Jane Yolen, and others involved in or with the Minneapolis writers' group known as the Scribblies — I've been told that they stand for "Pre-Joycean Fellowship." The Fellowship apparently believes that anything written after Joyce is, to put it politely, worthless. It's an odd conceit for a contemporary writer to hold and one has to assume that there's some sort of in-joke involved that the rest of us aren't getting because neither Bull's nor Shetterly's books hold true to the Fellowship's beliefs.

Books to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 8480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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The response we have had to Richard Bowes' Kevin Grierson stories has been extremely positive. The first, "On Death and the Deuce," (April, 1992) has been sold to two best-of collections. The second, "The Beggar at the Bridge," (December, 1993) and the third, "The Shadow and the Gunman" (February, 1994) have garnered a lot of word of mouth. "I Died, Sir, In Flame, Sir" is the fourth. We have another Grierson story in inventory.

All of the Kevin Grierson tales happen at a different point in Kevin's life and hence stand alone. Rick is combining them all into a novel, Minions of the Moon, *which promises to be as good as or better than the stories that inspired it.*

I Died, Sir, In Flame, Sir

By Richard Bowes

WEARING A WONDERFUL TURquoise blouse, Sarah Bryce Callendar opened the door of her guest room. Inside was a big bed with a soft comforter. A table and chest of drawers were set between two ten-foot-tall windows. "There's space for you here, Kevin. I'd like you to stay." Her auburn hair was long and worn loose.

The offer was not a surprise. Mutual friends had told me what to expect when they put the two of us back in touch. A few years before, Sarah and I had lived together to really bad effect. Clearly, this time, we would not be lovers. My bedroom was all the way across the loft from hers. Still, her kindness almost overwhelmed me. "Thanks for being able to forgive," I managed to tell her.

"When I heard you had cleaned up and that you needed a place, I knew you were the one I wanted here. How soon can you move in?"

With just a moment's chagrin at being thirty-plus and still scrounging for somewhere to live, I replied, "Tonight."

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Sarah took away the sting by saying, "Great," and making it a business matter. "I understand you have to hold two jobs to get by. I'd like you to quit the weekend one. Room and board will be free. Since I can't be here with Scotty Saturday and Sunday during the day, I'd especially like you to be around then. You heard why?"

"Something about your in-laws."

"They've made noises about wanting custody of their only grandchild."

Her son was over at a friend's. His room was next to mine, its door open. I looked in on a nine-year-old's lair and said, "What about Scott? I was pretty rough on him."

"He still asks about you, Kevin." Out in the main living area, a phone rang and Sarah went to answer it.

I looked around Scott's room. A green plastic brontosaurus with bright red eyes was new to me. The diesel engine and battered cars, the handful of beaten up metal grenadiers, I recalled from my last stay. They were a legacy of Scott Callendar Senior. The tall chest in the corner was Sarah's, come down to her from an ancestor who had been a ship's captain. In gold paint on its dark front, chipped and scratched Chinese men in robes and wide hats poked at a porcupine with long sticks.

On the chair next to the bed were a couple of books open face down. One, a collection of rhymes called *A Garland Knot for Children,* seemed familiar. Picking it up, I saw inscriptions on the title page indicating that it had been in the Callendar family for generations. The *Garland* contained favorites like "Humpty Dumpty" and "Mary Had a Little Lamb" along with items new to me such as "There Was a Lady Loved a Swine."

The original artwork was wood cuts. But the book had gotten annotated over the years with crayon drawings and faded pencil scribbles of children now old or dead. My attention was caught by a brand new thumb-sized illustration in red, black, and yellow. I recognized Scott Junior's work. The poem on that page went:

I CAME, SIR, FOR FAME, SIR,
THE SPOILS OF YOUR FAIR TOWN,
AND 'TWAS STRANGE TO SEE, SIR,
THE WHOLE WORLD WAS WATCHING ME.

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I DIED, SIR, IN FLAME, SIR.
THE OLD DEVIL TOOK ME DOWN.
IF YOU DOUBT 'TIS TRUE, SIR,
YOU WON'T WHEN HE COMES FOR YOU.

At first, I thought he had drawn a match head. It took me a moment to realize it was a fiery motorcycle and rider. When Scott was two, his father had died on a flaming bike. Once, roaring drunk, I had described the accident to the kid. Obviously he had remembered.

The drawing evoked a chain of memories I would have preferred not to face. But I couldn't do that. Part of staying sober involved my performing a kind of balancing act. I had to remember the past clearly but not let it control the present. Scott as a kid had no control over his present or his past. I turned away from his room resolved to repair what I had done.

In the rolling main area of her loft, the couches were draped with quilts in Southwestern motifs, samples for Sarah's store. She told me, "I'm advised not to let Scott go visit for fear of not getting him back. It's hard to make him understand why he can't see his only grandparents. And even though I think they're mighty creepy, I don't like him to grow up hating them.

"Recently, I noticed a black van parked across the street and a guy in it just watching. A couple of times I spotted another man out back staring at this place. I feel like I'm under observation."

The back windows looked out on a deserted Soho panorama of faded bricks and old wooden water towers. The roof behind was three floors down and separated from us by an alley. "Let's see what happens," I said, trying to sound wise and tough.

As she let me out, Sarah asked, "Remember Ian? You hated him, right? Well, he got real mean before he went back to England. Frankie you never met. Looked like a million bucks, had a million bucks, said he loved kids. After two months he was doubled over with back pain and screaming at us. I decided to take a long breath and think things over." I thought she looked a little haunted as she told me that.

Down on the cobblestone street, I looked for the black van she had mentioned. In the September twilight, artists in work clothes smoked dope on a loading platform, a cluster of Spanish women headed home from the Triboro Pinking Shears Company.

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When Sarah and her three-year-old son had settled into an empty factory floor, she had been a pioneer. By the mid-seventies, Manhattan south of Houston Street had started to boom, the World Trade Center twin towers were an eye-catching wonderment on the downtown skyline. But Fanelli's Bar and the shops still closed in the evening. Despite grow lamps in loft windows, whole blocks of Soho could seem empty after dark.

Riding the IRT uptown, I thought about Sarah's taste for guys who were flying off the beam, guys like her husband and me. Outside of that failing she was very successful. At twenty-three she had a child, lots of bills, and some connections among the Russian ladies who were quietly going blind embroidering blouses.

A couple of years later she had Callendar Days, a little store that got mentioned in the *Times* and *New York Magazine*. One Saturday afternoon when we two lived together, I staggered in there with a bloody nose. I had been supposed to take Scott to the zoo. But gin and rum and destiny played funny tricks. "I have people that I'm trying to wait on," Sarah said and managed very expertly to maneuver me into the storeroom in the rear of the shop.

At a little desk in the corner Scott sat doodling with magic markers. "Your mother is pissed off at me," I remarked, amazed that she couldn't accept my simple gift of myself.

"That's because you're stoned," he said like an adult explaining something to a child.

I begged to differ. "She's afraid that everybody she gets involved with is going to kill themselves. Just like your father did." Scott looked at me wide-eyed. His father's death was an unspoken event in the household. Since this seemed like the perfect moment, I asked, "You know what happened to your old man?"

He shook his head and I told him, "One winter night, he dropped five thousand mc's of untested California acid and took a motorcycle ride on Roosevelt Drive. He hit an ice patch and plowed into a bridge support. The gas tank blew up and he went over the side in a ball of flame. The bike was borrowed and the first thing your mother had to do was repay the owner."

Scott ran past me with his head down so that I couldn't see his face. On the desk was the *Garland Knot*, which I hadn't noticed before. As I went to pick it up, Sarah came into the storeroom and said, "I can't stand to see you this way, Kevin." I told her a few things about herself. The next day, I moved

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out of the loft and went right down the tubes.

That happened very fast. My return trip was much slower. A man named Leo Dunn helped. No one can pull you out of the gutter. But when I finally decided I wanted to crawl out, he showed me how. His number was the lucky charm in my wallet. The evening of my reunion with Sarah, I called from a pay phone and told him what had happened. "That sounds like wonderful luck, my friend," he said.

That was my thought also. I returned to the Abigail Adams Hotel at Thirty-Third and Lexington and packed my bags. As I did, some guy upstairs screamed like his teeth were being pulled. Then I walked out through a lobby full of hookers and took a cab downtown.

MY FIRST Saturday back in the loft was September bright. The TV was on in Scott's room when I made my way to the kitchen. The two of us hadn't spoken much since my return. Sarah went out the front door telling me, "This may be a late day."

The kitchen contained potentially dangerous things, sharp knives, a small box of matches. None of them could do harm if they were left alone. While the tea brewed, my eyes were drawn to the cabinet where she kept liquor.

My last time in residence it had been a shrine for display of my totemic symbol, the empty booze bottle. Since then it had been restocked with name brands: Johnny Walker Red, Bombay Gin, Napoleon brandy, a few well chosen wines.

The night I showed up again Sarah had asked me if I wanted her to clear it out. I shook my head. "Booze will always be there," Mr. Dunn once told me. "Get used to it. They won't reinstitute the Volstead Act just for you and me."

As I thought about that, Scott came out of his room and went to the refrigerator without saying anything. Pushing the dark hair from his eyes, he pulled out a giant Coke bottle, spun on one sneaker heel, hooked a mug off the shelf, and poured in one continuous action. As I sat wondering how to begin to untangle things, he saw me watching him. "Kevin?"

"Yeah?"

"Mom says you're not drinking and stuff."

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"That's right."

"I'm glad." Very solemnly, he came over to me and shook my hand.

"Me too," I said, full of wonder at kids' wisdom. "Listen, Scott, I'm sorry for a lot of things I may have said. About that last time in particular."

I was prepared to go on. But Scott nodded and said, "Okay," like the subject was closed and we were friends again.

That Saturday we had two adventures. The first began in Scott's room shortly after our handshake. He held up a drawing of an Indian medicine man wearing a buffalo mask. The eyes behind the holes looked mean. "This is a Sioux," he said. "I'm doing it for school You like him, huh?"

"It's great. Especially the eyes." I couldn't find *A Garland Knot for Children* and wasn't quite ready to ask. Suddenly, Scott turned toward the window and shouted. "There's the guy Mom talks about!"

Looking out, I saw a man with wild gray hair staring up avidly, eyes hidden behind thick glasses. His wrinkled face reminded me of an old sponge. I recognized a chance for an easy triumph. "That's TJ," I said. "Let's go talk to him."

Without hesitation, Scott ran for his jacket. As we walked around the block, I remembered TJ. He had been a drinking companion of Jackson Pollock, friend of De Kooning. A couple of falls on the head had left him permanently dazed, a very abstract expressionist. "The guy's an old time artist," I told Scott.

On Greene Street directly behind Sarah's place was a one-story converted garage. From my previous stay in the neighborhood, I knew that a bored old lady sculptor gave life drawing classes there on the weekends. She and TJ were a longtime item.

Everything worked perfectly. Scott and I arrived at the break. Students stood outside smoking, discussing art. Indoors, a young lady in a robe did flexing exercises to get her circulation back. I told the teacher, "Listen, we live on the next block. There's a problem at the back of our building and we'd like to get up on your roof, take a look."

She shrugged. We went up a flight of iron stairs, came out on the roof behind TJ. He was still looking up. Following his gaze, I saw what at first seemed like a stain on the wall next to Scott's and my windows.

It took me a moment to decipher it. Pointing, I told Scott, "That's an old advertising mural of some kind. The words are worn away. All that's left of

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the ad is color, splotches of red and dying yellow, like a faded canvas."

The artist turned around looking confused, a little embarrassed. "Good morning, TJ," I said. "Looking at the mural?"

"I was." He started walking away. "Fucking tourists," he added in a toothless Loony Tunes delivery. I felt bad intruding on him that way. But Scott seemed fascinated. When we went back downstairs, the class had started again. He watched the nude model out of the corner of his eye.

Outside, Scott told me, "TJ is okay. Frankie always said he was going to find the guy, scare him away. But Frankie always got sick, had a bad back. He was an asshole."

I had never met Frankie, but given what I knew of Sarah's tastes that seemed not unlikely. We went home and had lunch: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches all around. "We can tell your mother she doesn't have to worry about that." I felt like I was earning my keep.

Scott nodded, one man of the world to another, then asked out of nowhere, "Do you remember the Islands Game?"

"I'm the one who showed it to you." The kid amazed me. I had wondered how to bring up certain things that lay in Scott's past. The Islands Game was the perfect way. "Let's look at your toys. Got anything new?"

His room, with its wide expanse of floor, the light flooding in the windows, was an ideal playing area. Since I'd been gone, Scott had acquired a castle, a fine wooden structure with a drawbridge and some stalwart plastic knights to guard it. One knight appeared slightly fused like he might have been the victim of an experiment with fire.

Also present were a garage, a train station, what looked like the cabin of an antique Noah's ark, toy trees, a train and tracks and blocks. "Plenty of blocks," I said.

"Let's make three islands," Scott suggested. "And a boat."

The game was evocative. As we set to work, I thought of Uncle Jamey teaching me the game when I was about ten. A long and dapper man, his hair the color of gray sand, he was my mother's youngest uncle, over from Dublin for a family funeral. Stepping into my room, he saw me sitting alone among my possessions and said, "Ah, would you look at this!" Picking up a cannon, he asked, "Does it fire, now?" We talked for quite a while about my toys.

As mysterious to me as the death of the relative I hardly knew was the hostile chill in my parents' house. A few days later when my mother had to

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be away, Uncle Jamey came back and spent an afternoon playing on the floor with me. I remember his breath flavored with whiskey and cigarettes as he said, "Those you have in your hand are Highlanders. Fierce fighters but unwitting tools of English Imperialism. Where shall we put them?"

"In the fort," I answered. "You can be their leader if you want."

"Thanks kindly. And where do we put the fort?"

"On this island. They're hiding there because of the Indians and animals."

"The garrison and I will hold out against the half-naked savages and wild lions," said Uncle Jamey, who wrote for the newspapers back in Ireland. "And what will you be doing?"

"I'm this guy," I said, producing a cowboy on a rearing horse. "He's gonna lead the cavalry to rescue you. But he doesn't know where you are. He starts way over on this other island. He doesn't know you're in danger."

Mr. Dunn, who had taught me that I could never forget the past, also said that some memories were like land mines to be defused with great care. Kids are aware of everything and nothing. At ten, I knew that my mother and stepfather didn't get along and that it was getting worse and worse. But, as kids do, I accepted that as normal.

By the time of the funeral, my stepfather was never around, my mother seemed very angry. I had questions about what was happening and, in Jamey, an adult who could have answered them. But I couldn't find the words or the way to ask. While the two of them wound up their marriage, I was slaying lions, defeating Indians, rescuing Grand-Uncle Jamey.

As Scott and I built islands out of blocks, placed the buildings and trees on them, made a ship out of a shoe box, I remembered Jamey saying, "No one wins or loses the Islands Game."

"What about the castle?" I asked.

"Ian made that the castle of the evil prince," Scott said.

Jealousy rose in me. "He knew the game?"

"I showed it to him. He had to be the good knight and win." He gestured toward the slightly melted figure. "He was an asshole."

Ian had been my immediate successor and I couldn't have agreed more. "Did you show Frankie the game too?"

"One time. He wanted to be the American soldier and shoot everybody; then he hurt his back and couldn't play." Scott laid out the figures: the metal

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English guardsmen, one or two of whom had misplaced their heads, the knights, a dozen or so plastic Indians, several West Point Cadets, an outsize G.I. missing his rifle.

We even had civilians: a worn, ancient Mr. and Mrs. Noah, a little silver ballerina, Mickey Mouse dressed as a Keystone Cop, an armless china shepherdess, a small pair of pipe cleaner dolls in Mexican gear. Animals also appeared, a wooden bear and tiger left over from the Flood, assorted plastic cows and pigs, a camel from a nativity scene.

"The G.I. is on this island with the tiger," I said. "He doesn't know the war is over." As I picked the figure up, I noticed a welt along its back.

Scott produced a chicken which laid white marble eggs and was bigger than a man mounted on a horse. "Maybe that can be the Roc. Its eggs are magic," I suggested.

"It lives in the castle on the big island," Scott added. He put the grenadiers in a boat. "These belonged to my father. This one is me." He held up the officer. "I heard the legend. I'm sailing the boat looking for it."

"I'm the captain of the ship." I put a cadet on the bridge. "Whoever gets a Roc's egg can ask any question he wants and the Roc will answer." That was my own contribution to the game: the chance to ask a question.

Half the afternoon went in setting up the islands. The rest we spent moving the boat a couple of feet each turn, deciding where to land and what happened then. Scott as the Grenadier officer was brave yet merciful. I tagged along, uttering an occasional "Avast there," in my capacity as the ship's captain. Between us, we played everyone else from the camel to Mrs. Noah.

From a position flat on the floor, I discovered again that furniture could be mountains, the ceiling sky. Holding a railroad engine in one hand, a cow in the other, I felt at once mouse and monster: in other words, nine years old.

As the sun faded, Scott pushed the guardsmen and the Indians who had become their friends past the Ark cabin where the ballerina stood. "Because they helped her capture the bear," I explained, "the silver goddess tells them about a secret entrance to the castle."

With amazing ease Scott polished off the knights who were doing duty as the slave robots of the Roc. I sensed his great urgency. The final confrontation was anticlimactic. The grenadiers burst into the throne room, Scott pressed the Roc's head and grabbed the egg.

"I get to ask it a question," he said, "and it has to answer correctly."

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"Okay."

Without even taking a deep breath, he asked, "Are Kevin and Mom going to start making it again?"

Instead of pretending to be the Roc, I answered him simply. "No chance at all. She's letting me stay here for old times' sake."

Scott nodded seriously.

Then I moved the cadet/naval captain up to the throne, pressed the chicken's head, and picked up the white glass egg. This seemed the right moment to ask, "What has become of the sacred lost book *A Garland Knot for Children*?"

Scott was startled. He shrugged and gave me a wide-eyed baffled look like I had asked the unknowable. "Hey," I said, "the mystical and holy chicken has to answer."

Scott was quick. He spoke into cupped hands for an echoing, oracle effect. "It's gone to the land of dust bunnies and lost socks." All I could do was laugh. Afterwards I looked again under his bed and behind the radiator.

When Sarah returned, Scott leaped up, saying, "Me and Kevin talked to that guy on the roof out back. He's an old artist. He's cool."

Next I decided to see about the Van Man. My research job paid badly but was loosely structured. One morning at eight-thirty I sat at a front window and watched Scott get picked up for school. No van was in sight. A bit after ten, just as Sarah left to open her store, the black van pulled up across the street.

Van Man was a beefy, sullen guy in his thirties. He sat at the wheel staring as Sarah walked up to Houston Street. It was hard to blame him. Living on the downside, I had almost forgotten that people could move with her grace. Van Man watched other ladies too. After a while, he got out, loaded boxes from the back of the van onto a hand truck and headed down the block.

Very casually, I followed him over to De Luca's on Prince Street. These days, Dean and De Luca's is a huge upscale emporium on Broadway that sells coffee for a dollar a bean. Then, De Luca's was a tiny shop offering the new residents of Soho good breads, fine cheese, and countermen who made sandwiches while singing belle canto in the manner of Maria Callas.

From them I found out about the Van Man. His name was Jay Imanella and he delivered farmer's cheese his mother made. "Delivery days are the only time he gets away from her," said a tall, bearded diva. "We call him The

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Merry Farmer because he isn't. Usually we're his last stop. If you're really anxious to cruise him, he's probably down the street tying one on."

"Down the street" meant Fanelli's with its antique frosted windows and array of boxing photos. Jay Imanella sat at the polished bar amidst light sculptors and office supply salesmen. He drank in a joyless, determined way as I sipped club soda in a corner. Then he went back to sit in his truck and watched women go by.

All this I saved until its proper time. One night I came back late from visiting Dunn and found Sarah sitting on a huge couch, her legs drawn up under a quilt, looking worried. She said, "The creep in the van was out front this morning when I left for the shop. He was still there when Scott came back from school."

"You think it's your in-laws?" I asked, knowing it wasn't but curious about the Callendars.

"When they threatened to sue for guardianship, my lawyer warned they might put the place under surveillance. To find something to use against me. She suggested they might try a snatch."

Sarah sighed. "I joke about it, but I really think my mother-in-law is a witch. I don't want Scott to grow up hating his father's family. But they are so nasty and so strange. I can understand what my husband was trying to escape."

Sarah hardly ever talked about him directly. "We were all pretty rebellious at that point," I said.

"Every time he talked to them on the phone, he'd get angry, then he'd get stoned. And you remember how he got then, Kevin. Especially just before the end."

I recalled Scott Senior, dark-haired, mad-eyed, storming out into a fiery death in the rain. I remembered many things. But all I said was, "Don't worry about Van Man."

My mentor Mr. Dunn would have said that what I planned was sleazy and more than a little cruel to a fellow drunk. So I never told him about it.

A couple of days later I let Van Man stay in Fanelli's until he was sure to have a load aboard. Then I called the bar and asked for Jay Imanella. The poor, befuddled slob came to the phone. "Imanella," I told him in a dead, phlegm-choked voice, "I saw you looking at my wife. You know which one she is." Then I uttered the most terrible threat he could imagine. Two minutes later

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the van sped away.

After a couple of weeks, Sarah asked, "Is Van Man gone for good?" and I just smiled enigmatically.

Maybe my sobriety was a new chance at childhood, or I was trying out what it would be like to have a kid. But in lots of ways that autumn, I was a perfect companion for a nine-year-old. I felt closer to Scott than I ever had to most people. A couple of times we played touch football with some of his friends. One Sunday he had to go to a tenth birthday party for a beautiful little Asian girl whom he hated.

I began reading to him: *Treasure Island, Doctor Dolittle and the Secret Lake, The Thurber Carnival, Grimms' Tales, Nine Princes in Amber.* He liked most of them. I loved them all.

His hand-illustrated *A Garland Knot for Children* was nowhere to be found. I searched Fourth Avenue used bookstores for another copy. No one had ever heard of it.

On my way downtown from Mr. Dunn's one evening, I stopped at F.A.O. Schwartz and bought a fine plastic African elephant with an arched trunk and flared tusks. Scott was delighted when I placed the elephant at the center of the labyrinth we constructed in our next Islands Game. It pleased me too, but I guess it was a kind of bait.

Once, I awoke with the fading memory of a dream. In it, I stood in the street outside on a gray, overcast dawn. Looking downtown, I saw, instead of the World Trade Towers, the jean-clad legs of a gigantic child, disappearing up into the morning fog. Nothing in the neighborhood stirred. The only sound was a motorcycle blocks away and approaching fast.

A Saturday or two later, we built a mountain topped by a ramshackle pagoda. Looking up from the floor I saw the Chinese men on the chest tormenting the porcupine and said, "Those are the wise men of the mountain. Whoever makes it to the top of the pagoda can ask them a question."

When we took out the toys, I discovered that the elephant listed to the side. One of its legs was partially melted. Scott too looked surprised by this. I said nothing. In our game that day, I made sure that after some adventures and much imaginary mayhem, both Scott and I got to ask questions.

Scott asked first. He seemed a little anxious. "Can I get a skateboard for my birthday?"

In an outrageous accent, I replied, "This question is for wisdom greater

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even than that of the all-knowing porcupine pokers. You must ask Sarah, the mighty mother."

For my question, I held up the elephant and asked, "How did this get burned?"

Scott started to cup his hands. He thought better of it. Very hesitantly he asked, "You know that book you asked about?"

"The *Garland Knot.*"

"You saw the drawing I made?"

"The flaming cycle."

"That's what did it." He shrugged like I could believe him or not as I wanted.

I started to ask him more questions, but he just stared at the elephant not with shame or regret but with a kind of savage awe.

When I looked, the matches in the kitchen were undisturbed. I found no others in the loft. The matter lay between us as a barrier all week. Next Saturday we sat watching TV. Scott beside me on the couch slouched down so his sneakers could reach the coffee table I rested my legs on. Out of nowhere, he asked, "Kevin? Remember what you said about my father?"

Flinching, I replied, "Whatever I may tell you, I'll never say that a lot of the time I don't act like an asshole."

"What you said was true. I asked about it. He's cool. If you hadn't said that, I would never have asked anyone. Mom wouldn't say much. But Grandma Callendar showed me a lot.

"She taught me where to draw the picture of him. That book was both of theirs. It's not around most of the time, only when Dad thinks there's going to be trouble. And the two of us can tell each other stuff. Like he was mad you were here but I told him you're cool."

I could think of nothing to say. In a couple of weeks, Scott was going to be ten years old, approaching the height of childhood, a king among kids. I had loved his mother before she met her husband. And at first I had loved the father for his style, all speed and power and appetite. Later I saw it translate into brutality.

Scott breathed a sigh, as if relieved that the message was delivered. Did I detect some trepidation? A trace of the outlaw's kid who craves his father even as he fears him? Before I could consider that, Scott jumped up and said, "Let's go and I'll show you the skateboard that I want."

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Even though Halloween was past and everyone was thinking of family and Thanksgiving, that afternoon was lingering October bright. Sarah was going to a dinner party after work and asked me to stay till she got back. "No later than twelve."

I took that to mean one. Maybe two. Plenty of time for me to seek my fortune over on West Street. Scott was long in bed when something called *Saturday Night Live* came on. Amazingly, it seemed to be all drug jokes. An old TV movie followed that. Then I awoke to the sound of a key in the door. "Kev, I'm sorry," were her first words. "I just could not get away." Something had not worked out for her that evening.

"It's fine." That came out sounding a lot sadder than I had intended.

She crossed the living room to where I sat and gave me a cognac flavored kiss. It was the first time we had kissed since before I'd moved away. "Scott's asleep?" she asked. I nodded. "I'm a lousy mother."

"You're just a party animal. He showed me the skateboard he wants for his birthday," I told her.

"What do you think?" Her tone said she saw it as a step on the road to the flaming motorcycle.

"It'll be okay. In fact I was thinking of getting one also."

Sarah stood before me. She reached down and undid a button on my shirt. I said nothing. This was unanticipated. But part of me had hoped for it all along.

Sarah undressed me for a while before I stood and kissed her. In heels she was taller than I was barefoot. The taste of booze remained in her mouth. "Closest I can come to a nightcap," I said and started to undress her. City light shone through the windows and it was chill in the loft as we went to her room.

Our being together was a surprise to both of us. My recent partners were anonymous pick-ups. That night with Sarah was wonderfully familiar but upside down. For the first time, I was sober and she was stoned, a creature of the subconscious. She swam in my arms, brushed me like silk, bit me.

Sometime later, she asked, "Kev, you were so smug about it. How did you get rid of Van Man?"

"Simple. I just went downstairs and tipped his little truck over." She pinched me. "You really want to know? Promise you won't think less of me as a man?" She raised her hand like a girl scout.

"I asked around about him. Then I called him up." Here I put on the voice

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full of phlegm and danger. "Imanella? I see what you're doing. I know where you live. I'm gonna tell your mother you're getting drunk and looking at my wife." Even as Sarah laughed, I knew telling her was a dumb thing to do. A good magician doesn't reveal his tricks. A foolish one thinks the audience will love him anyway.

Abruptly, Sarah stopped laughing and asked, "Van Man had nothing to do with my in-laws?"

"Not so far as I can tell."

"Guilt projection. My damn anxiety leaking out. I did analysts, you know. All kinds. Because of my recurring feeling that I didn't do enough to help my husband before that night. Rationally I know there was no stopping him. I was afraid of him just before he died. He was demonic. It's awful to say, but I'm happy Scott can't remember his father."

That was the moment for me to tell her about *A Garland Knot for Children* and the singed toys. But just then, from somewhere uptown, louder than a backfire, came a single bang, an explosion in the night.

I started and Sarah responded by sighing and shifting away from me. A police siren ran north. Others, fire and ambulance, followed. Clear and distant they were, as if far away or long ago. In the suddenly cold loft, in the suddenly wide bed, I looked to Sarah to see if she heard. But she was asleep.

Passing Scott's room on my way to bed I noticed that his door was partly open. At the corner of my eye, a spark flared and was gone when I turned. Outside the windows, nothing stirred on the dark roof tops of Soho.

Sleep was neither quick nor easy. Dreams and memories got entangled. Scott Callendar stared at me, his dark eyes pinned on his pale face. He sang a song of which I remembered the lines,

> I drove, sir, in flame, sir
> I burned like a match head.

I WOKE UP to a drizzly Sunday morning. Groggy, I put on a robe and staggered to the kitchen. There, Scott whined at his mother, "Then don't get me anything else. If I don't get that board, I don't want your lousy presents!"

"Fine," Sarah replied, tight-lipped. "Good morning," she said to me and left to get ready for work.

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Scott looked up angrily and asked, "Were you out late?"

"Up late." It isn't wise, let alone possible, to lie to a kid. But I felt that was not the moment to discuss the fact that his mother and I had been together again.

I showered and dressed and accompanied Sarah downstairs. The loading docks were bare, the street empty. There were things about her husband and son that I had to tell her and I didn't know how to start. Mist swirled around the World Trade Towers. She said, "I'm going to miss the Van Man. If I have nothing to worry about, then what am I worried about?"

As I embraced her she told me, "Last night, I dreamed about my husband. Like he comes by to make sure every relationship goes bad. I've tried moving forward with my life. I've tried looking back. Nothing works."

That was me, a nothing way of looking back. What I had been going to say stuck in my throat. Sarah grimaced. "I'm sorry, Kevin. Let's talk later when I feel better."

Riding back upstairs, I knew I couldn't stay there. It seemed that all the good spots in the world were taken and that there was no place for me. For the first time in many weeks, I remembered the liquor cabinet, pictured the bottles. Then I got angry at my self-pity and decided to give Mr. Dunn a call.

Instead I opened the loft door and heard Scott in his room singing with a beautiful clear tone. It was a jaunty marching song like "Dixie" or "Yankee Doodle." Then I picked out the words:

> You brought, sir, I bought, sir,
> Drugs that would kill me well.
> But you never said, sir,
> Ice paved my way to hell.
>
> I drove, sir, in flame, sir,
> I burned like a match head.
> And scarce was I dead, sir,
> My bride and you began to play.

In his room, Scott sat on his bed with *A Garland Knot for Children* open in front of him. He ignored me standing in the doorway until I asked, "Where did you learn the tune?"

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"Grandma." It seemed we were barely on speaking terms.

"And the new words?"

He held up the book. "They're different each time. It's how my dad talks to me."

"Scott, when I said there was nothing between Sarah and me, that was true." I sounded like a lawyer.

He regarded me with contempt. "My dad's real angry. I told him that it was going to be okay with you and Mom. He didn't believe me. He was right." Holding the book open in my direction, he riffled the pages. They flapped like wings. A bike of bright fire sprang at my face. Its rider's hair was red flame, his face skull white, his eyes two black holes.

Flinching, I backed away. Scott slammed the book shut and we were alone in his room. The remnants of our last game lay on the floor between us. "Get out!" he said. Beneath his anger, I sensed his fear. I was very aware of my own.

"I'll be moving." Not, however, before I tried to finish what I had so stupidly started. "Let's play the Island Game one last time."

Scott glanced around uneasily and muttered, "He doesn't want you here." But when he looked down at his toys, he couldn't resist.

It took just a moment to go to the kitchen and stick the box of matches in my pocket. Before fear and doubt got the better of me, I returned to the room. Scott was already building islands. The book lay open on his bed.

The last game was our most elaborate. Everything, from the wooden Mrs. Noah to plastic dinosaurs, was used. Scott decided to be a drummer boy and I chose to be an Indian chief.

The game itself took over, a most violent expedition. Our ship wrecked itself on the shore. A dragon/brontosaurus attacked a railroad bridge as the train we rode crossed it. As long as I was on the alert, paying attention to my surroundings, all went well.

But in a lull in the action, I remembered Scott Callendar Senior's last night. He had punched Sarah and locked her in the bathroom. When I came by, he was playing with his son. I wondered if a kind of twisted remorse had brought him blazing back to life.

Suddenly, I was back on the floor of the bedroom. Plastic Indians stood around me like statues and I was no bigger than they. The tiger peeked out

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from behind a tree. The flaming cycle rounded the corner of a hill and headed right at me. I shook my head, stood up with a cry. I was no longer small. The flaming cycle was gone.

Scott said, "He did stuff like that to get rid of Ian and Frankie. Ian had nightmares. Frankie got hurt trying to roll away." He didn't bother to add that they were assholes.

My advantage over those two was that I knew what I was up against. Our game continued. The elephant was the oracle. It stood on a hill in a grove of trees. It had been scorched again; the trunk and tusks were melted.

"Why did you kill my father?" Scott's question when he reached the grove was simple and direct. The book lay open in his lap. It was like being under the judgment of a god, remote and childlike in his purity.

"It was the ice that killed him. The bike. His own twisted self." Again I spoke weasel words of adulthood. My answer angered the kid. He shook the book. The cycle flashed at the corner of my eyes. It roared behind me.

Quickly, I said, "My turn to ask a question." Hands shaking, I pulled out the box and lighted a match. "Do you remember your father that last night?" Scott stared at the match, book frozen in hand. He shook his head.

"Yes, you do. It was in your drawing." The sound of the engine faded. I blew the match out and lighted another. "You were two years old. Your mother was working that night. Remember how your father played with matches? He stood over the crib throwing them so close that you could almost grab them. Each one got nearer. Every one had gone out on the floor. He hadn't yet managed to burn you and he hadn't set fire to the room."

This was rough. Scott was rigid, expressionless as I continued. "To get him away from you, I suggested that he and I take a walk. When I got him outside, he wanted me to ride with him on this motorcycle he had borrowed. I didn't go and I didn't try to stop him. Even though I knew he could be killed. To me it was a choice between losing him and losing you and Sarah. You remember that. It's why you're still afraid of him."

The boy didn't blink. I said, "You have to drop him, Scott. What your father is doing is hurting you. But you know who he's hurting more?" No response. "Your mother. You can't let him do what he's doing to her. He's made her very unhappy. Do you want that?"

Scott wouldn't look my way. There was an endless pause before he

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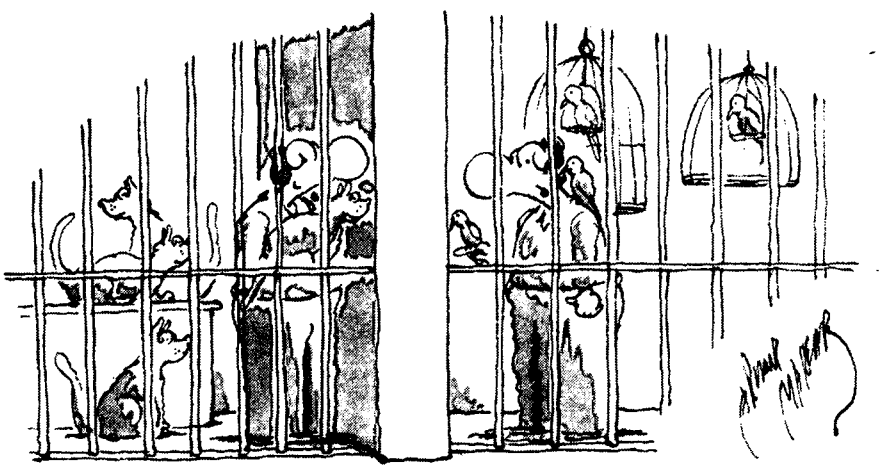
slammed the book shut. Then we both heard an explosion distant but clear. Sirens screamed in the distance. He leaned against me and cried while I thought of ways to explain to Sarah what had happened.

When Scott felt a bit better, we put away the toys. A *Garland Knot for Children* was nowhere to be found.



"Yeah, I'm the Birdman of Alcatraz, who wants to know?"

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*In a few short years, Nicholas A. DiChario has become a name to watch. His short fiction has made the award ballots and he was a finalist for the John W. Campbell award for best new writer. He has contributed some of the most talked-about stories to Mike Resnick's Alternate anthologies series (*Alternate Presidents, Alternate Warriors, *etc., all from Tor Books).*

Last month, Nick appeared in F&SF *with a story he had written in collaboration with Mike Resnick ("Birdie"). This month Nick stands alone, with a wonderful tale of taxes, angst, and ... plumbing.*

Drainage

By Nicholas A. DiChario

DELSEY SLOUCHED OVER HIS kitchen table and fingered through a stack of bills, receipts, vouchers, bank statements, and deposit slips. The dreaded shoe box. This year's tax season would come and go without Ellen, and he was fully prepared to mishandle his finances with the same finesse he'd mishandled his marriage.

Cid, tinkering with a crescent wrench in front of the kitchen sink, chuckled under his breath. Delsey ignored him, unfolding an old rejection slip from the *New Yorker.* So much for his sonnet. He would remain an unpublished poet for yet another fiscal year. It was a bitter little poem anyway, a versification of an ugly divorce, complete with custody arrangements, unscrupulous lawyers, and shameless self-pity.

"Hear about the Bronx Bank Robber?" Cid said, leaning over Delsey's garbage disposal and deftly snatching a Stanley screwdriver from the Black & Decker mini-tool-tote on the kitchen counter. "Here's a guy, in ten minutes, who robs a bank in Flatbush and then he hits a bank in Beechhurst. How does

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the guy get all the way from Flatbush to Beechhurst and pull two bank jobs in ten minutes? Impossible, right? Well get this. Both bank cameras get photos of the same guy — the *same* guy. But the best part is — are you ready for this? — some Catholic priest runs this flophouse in the South Bronx swears the guy was sleeping off a drunk and never left his bed."

Delsey scoffed. "Great journalism from the supermarket checkout line."

"Pick up some interesting tidbits if you're willing to weed through the Hollywood gossip." Cid pointed the butt of his screwdriver at Delsey. "Did you know that human females are the only species on Earth who experience pain while delivering their babies? It's the evolution of the human skull. Our brains have developed so fast, see, and the pelvis can't get any bigger without screwing up how women walk. I believe our next great evolutionary advancement will be some kind of whacky gestalten outgrowth of the body and the beaner." He tapped his forehead with the Stanley.

Delsey picked up the latest issue of *Rock Disc* magazine and searched for his name in the contents: D.T. Furphy, Freelance Critic. (The "T" was for Townshend. He'd added it in 1968, in an unsuccessful attempt to confuse Selective Service.) Nothing in this issue, nothing in the last issue, and at this rate nothing in the next. Critic's block.

Thank God for Ellen's child support.

Cid hunkered over the sink, bearing down on his screwdriver. "I've been known to file some pretty mean tax returns in my day. Be glad to help you out."

"Just fix the drain. Damn Water Authority. Ever since they converted to that NYNEX monstrosity computer system, my plumbing hasn't worked right."

"The Industrial Revolution is over, Furf. Welcome to the Information Age. Supercomputers with teraflops speed, robotic links, sensory-response units. Man has to learn how to interact. That NYNEX will pay for itself in no time. California is already using something similar. Its cost-performance ratio is out of this world."

Not too long ago, Cid had loaned Delsey an article about the Water Authority's new NYNEX computer, "A communications transference modern miracle." Multiplex networking had arrived! the article lauded, a supercomputer advanced enough to upgrade circuit switching to something

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called packet switching, a system capable of handling huge chunks of data in microbursts, up to ten million bits per second, translate the information and deliver it in consumable packets faster than you could sneeze to any on-line sub station with a receiving unit as Stone Age as a modem. It could open and close valves in an electronic blink, siphon a reservoir or cut off water flow to a main break within nanoseconds. Microbursts had dissolved the span between decision making and response time to near nothing. And yet drains still clogged and toilets continued to back up.

The telephone rang. Delsey tossed the magazine aside and picked up the receiver; it was his editor from *Rock Disc.*

"I've got an interview set up for you with Lou Reed two hours before the show tonight," Eidelstein said. "Seven o'clock at the Hilton. Can you make it?"

"Of course."

"Good — oh, and Furf, I'm expecting something hot from you, right? I know you've been riding some rough waters lately, with the wife bailing out and all, but you've got to put it behind you, man. Your last couple of pieces have been, well, let's face it, unambitious, disappointing. I want it fresh. I run a progressive magazine. No trite, press-kit prose. But I don't need to remind you of that, do I, Furf?"

"Not to worry. I've already got some great stuff sketched out." A lie. But a bold one.

"Looking forward to it. Don't let me down. I'm going out on a limb for you. If it's hot, I'm talking nuclear, I'll give you the cover."

Delsey hung up the phone. A cover story in *Rock Disc* magazine might spare his ego and his checking account any further embarrassments, at least for a couple more months.

"How about I patch those loose bricks on your front walk when I'm done here?" Cid mopped the sweat from his forehead with a rag that had been, in its prior life, a pair of jockey shorts. "Somebody trips, hurts himself, he'll sue the ass out from under your dick before you can bite it. Especially them Hairy Krishnas. Can't trust a one of them."

"It's pronounced *Har*-e, Cid, like in *car.*"

"Right. Did you establish your amount of allowable expenses yet? You know you can subtract a portion of your mortgage interest based on the size of your home-office space."

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"How long are you going to be in my kitchen?"

"Long as it takes, I imagine."

It took two hours. And before Delsey could run his water, Cid would have to come back to install a "gizmo." April 14th was already a third gone. He pushed aside his taxes and scribbled a list of things to do:

1. Research at library, write skeleton for Reed review, 9:00 A.M. — 12:00.
2. Lunch at Pasquale's Bistro w/Lumpy and Mouse.

(He was looking forward to this. He'd had to cancel his old army buddies the last three times.)

3. Stop at market — milk, Sugar Pops, French Bread Pizzas, microwave popcorn.
4. Pick up Corey after school, 2:30/drop at sitter's.
5. Dinner w/Vanessa, 5:00.

(He had met Vanessa a month ago at his sister Heidi's wedding. She was friendly, intelligent, creative, attractive. An account exec for the ad agency of Fielding & Fielding. He had taken an instant shine to her.)

6. Reed/interview, Hilton, 7:00.
7. Reed/show, Haskyn Theatre, 8:00.
8. Complete review and FAX to Eidelstein.

(This would be his last chance to get something in for the July issue.)

9. Finish taxes.

There, not so bad after all. His day looked much more manageable on paper.

Several things happened to fuck it up:

The local library didn't open until noon on Fridays. For the third Friday in a row this detail had managed to elude him. He decided to drive to the main branch instead, making a mental note along the way to price new mufflers for his decrepit '82 Toyota Tercel. By the time he navigated bumper-to-bumper traffic and road-construction crews and found himself a place to park several blocks away — not cheap — 10:30 had already come and gone.

Microfilm, stored in the basement, needed to be requisitioned, at least a ten-minute process. Magazines that weren't microfilmed always seemed to be missing, and today proved no exception. Long lines formed at the copiers. Silence was a myth. He called to cancel his lunch with Lumpy and Mouse, and wondered if they would ever bother calling him back. By the time two o'clock rolled around he hadn't even fleshed out the background for his

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'review, and sketching the skeleton seemed light-years away. He gathered his material and left to pick up Corey.

When Corey wasn't waiting for him outside of school, he remembered about his son's soccer game. Corey would need a ride at 5:30, not 2:30, which meant his dinner with Vanessa, for the third time in as many weeks, would have to be rescheduled. He decided to break their date in person, and hoped she'd understand.

"Of course I understand, Delsey. It's just, well, maybe we'd better call the whole thing off." She flipped her bangs and squared her shoulders.

"Absolutely not," he said too loudly. "This is just one of those days when everything self-destructs. How about I make it up to you as soon as things slow down. Promise." Desperation had crept into his voice. The security guard who looked like a Marine drill sergeant, the one who had earlier threatened him with the I-Ain't-Amused redneck stare for bothering "Our Ms. Halidae" on an afternoon she'd left specific instructions not to be disturbed, snickered with no vestige of subtlety. Vanessa had come down to the lobby instead of inviting him up to her office, a tactic that even an inept Dear Abby would have recognized as a distancing ploy.

"Well...," She hesitated, clasped his hands, looked apologetic. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry because I really like you, Delsey, but I can't get involved with a man who's so irresponsible. Don't take this personally. I've had two bad marriages and it's made me cautious. I need stability in my life. I understand what you've been going through with the divorce and trying to take care of a ten-year-old boy by yourself. It can be a real strain. I'm not an insensitive woman. I lived through the sixties. I used to finger-paint my face. I would have slit my throat for Janis Joplin and I remember peeing my pants when Jimi Hendrix walked on the 'Dick Cavett Show.' But I'm past all that now. If you want to know the truth, Delsey, I think you're self-destructive. I think you're sabotaging yourself, like you don't feel you deserve to be happy or something...."

Vanessa paused to gulp some air. Delsey noticed the security guard riveted to their conversation.

"...Heidi has talked to me at length about you. Your sister loves you very much, you know, but she's worried. She says you're this way with everybody and everything. I have a friend, a psychiatrist — " Vanessa pressed a business

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card into the palm of his hand. "Seven out of ten middle Americans would benefit from just one psychoanalysis session. Not that I think you need just one."

Vanessa stood, spun around, and marched into the elevator. The doors slid shut behind her with a *swoosh* and a *ding*. The end of round one. A technical knockout. She never looked back.

The security guard said, "Have a nice day."

Delsey drove home 10 MPH over the speed limit with the windows rolled down and "Are You Experienced" cranked past the eleven button. His Pioneer was having a fit, the rust on his dashboard slam-danced to the bass line, and his hair follicles shivered. Anyone who was past Hendrix might as well be dead.

WHEN DELSEY got home he collapsed on the couch and buried his chin in a pile of dirty laundry.

He hadn't washed the dishes in a week. His fridge was bare. His bathroom smelled like the subway. For the past few weeks he'd been suffering bouts of chronic fatigue. He'd even lost a few pounds. He wondered if he might have a touch of that Beijing flu he had heard so much about from Cid.

Probably not. Overreacting as usual. Ellen had abhorred that particular personality defect, along with several others. The truth? He simply couldn't get organized without Ellen. He was sinking. Instead of things getting easier with time, as all of his well-intentioned, also-divorced friends had assured him they would, little things, petty things, things that had mystically magically disappeared when Ellen ran the household, now grew into intractable albatrosses.

He closed his eyes and let his chin sink deeper into the laundry.

"Hey, Delsey!" Cid yelled from the kitchen. "Hope you don't mind, let myself in. Hear about that lady doctor in California? She delivers some woman's baby in Salinas, and five minutes later her mother has this heart attack in Fresno, see, and she uses CPA — "

"CPR — "

"Right, she uses CPA and saves the old bat's life. But how does she get from Salinas to Fresno in five minutes? Impossible, right? Get this. An entire nursing staff swears she had the flu or something, and she was sleeping it off

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in the doctor's lounge. They say she never left the hospital in — are you ready for this? — in Palo Alto. She's a resident at some veterans' hospital in *Palo Alto.*"

Delsey went to the kitchen and leaned against the doorjamb. If he didn't get some rest he'd be worthless during his interview and he'd probably fall asleep at the show. "Cid, finish the sink some other time. Please. I insist."

Cid looked up, bemused. "Sometimes you remind me of a squirrel monkey. Whenever one of those stinkers feels his dominance hierarchy is being threatened, he'll let out this high-pitched squeak, lift his leg in the air, and flash his pecker."

"Out!" Delsey trudged down the hall and slammed the bedroom door behind him. He forced a deep breath through his lungs, picked up the telephone, and dialed Ellen's office.

"I never would've called you, Ellen, if it wasn't important."

"It had better be. I'm interviewing a client."

He felt his innards churn but promptly overrode it, imagining the July issue of *Rock Disc* magazine with his story splashed across the cover. His lips tremored. "I need a favor. Do you think you could pick up Corey tonight after his soccer game and drop him off at the sitter's? It'll just be this once, I promise. I'd never ask if I weren't in a jam."

"Delsey, need I remind you of our divorce settlement? You have custody because your freelance life-style is more conducive to parenting. You have the house, Delsey. Why am I paying child support? So I can run errands for you? If you can't manage to squeeze your son into the busy little schedule of your busy little life, perhaps you'd better reassess your priorities. Just remember this. If you find single fatherhood too much of a challenge, you'll be picking up Corey every other weekend. Do I make myself clear?"

"He's your son, too."

"Corey tells me you're not dating anyone. Maybe you should be. You need someone to take care of you."

"My personal life is none of your goddamn business!" Delsey slammed the phone in its cradle, but Ellen had disconnected him first. Bitch! He should have expected this from a woman who'd insisted she be called gravid rather than pregnant.

Delsey went past the kitchen into the living room. Cid must have gone, thank God. He pushed Jeff Beck's *Blow by Blow* into the CD player and eased

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up the volume. "Fusion," he said. "Music to tame the savage beast."

Four o'clock. He had one precious hour to himself. The thought of a hot, relaxing bath became irresistible. Water. Steaming hot water. He stripped, filled his bathtub, and sank neck-deep into a sea of foamy bubbles — apricot and aloe — Ellen's favorite.

Delsey didn't want to think about the night in front of him, but he needed a solid game plan to pull him through. First things first. Pick up Corey at 5:30. He wouldn't have time to drop off his son at the sitter's so he would have to bring him along on the interview. He cringed at this breach of professionalism, but could see no way around it. He'd make his apologies and hope that Lou Reed would find it humorous and that word wouldn't get back to Eidelstein and that Corey was over his bouts of spontaneous diarrhea. Then he'd run Corey to the sitter's, grab a very-fast-food bite to eat, and get to Haskyn Theatre to cover the show. He'd put in an all-nighter to crank out something worthy of a cover story if it drained every last breath out of his heaving lungs. Fuck the taxes altogether. He'd get Cid to help him tomorrow.

Phew.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, letting the hot water fill his pores. He allowed the sweat to bead on his forehead. Jeff simmered into a steamy rendition of "Cause We've Ended as Lovers," and Delsey opened his pores to that too and fell into the music with an uninhibited ease. What a music critic loves he loves completely, religiously, unto death.

Ellen could learn a thing or two if she'd listen to just one bent note, one bending, bleeding weeping Jeff Beck note. Let it penetrate her. She'd never be the same. If she had tried even once during their marriage sentence to understand his passion for music she might have learned to love something about him along the way. They might have had a chance together.

He sank.

Slowly he submerged into a huge reservoir of warm, clear, silky, apricot water.

When he touched bottom his toes met smooth, white porcelain. Above him, swirling white clouds matched the plaster patterns of his bathroom ceiling. The sun glowed like a fluorescent tube curled in the shape of a cinnamon roll.

Silky water...silky body...silky mind...

He sank to the drain.

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A plug, wedged deep inside the drain, needed to be removed. He pulled at it.

Cid appeared in a canoe fathoms above shouting something through the wall of water, "Twist, don't yank, TWIST!"

Ellen, beside him in the canoe, wore a life jacket and nothing else. She peered over Cid's shoulder, looking disappointed. "He'll never get it," she said, scratching her crotch. (Ellen had always been susceptible to yeast infections.)

And then Ellen shouted something else: "You're drowning, dummy!"

Delsey snapped awake, coughed up a handful of water, and clung to the edge of the tub. The first thing he noticed was how cold the water had turned, and then his puckered skin, and then the quiet darkness. He leapt out of the tub and ran naked into the living room. The digital clock on his stereo glared in uncompromising red: 4:03 A.M. He'd slept through!

Corey! He ran into his son's bedroom, and found Corey sleeping peacefully.

He forced himself to breathe...a shallow, tremulous breath. He wrapped a robe around his shivering body, went into the kitchen, and fumbled with his coffee pot, shaking like an addict.

How could he have acted so irresponsibly? — stranding his son, missing his interview and the concert and his deadline — *damn*, he'd never get another assignment, he'd be blacklisted by editors and musicians alike, by record company flunkies and gum-champing secretarial twinkies.

He sat on a stool, slumped over the kitchen counter, and felt the frayed edges of a nasty depression begin to fold in on him.

Then he noticed something different about the kitchen table. *Spotless!* Someone had done his taxes. Cid. Cid must have picked up Corey after the soccer game, seen the taxes unfinished, and, Christ, he had to have spent all night on them. For one brief moment he felt grateful....

The jingling of the telephone woke him four hours later. It was Vanessa.

"I never would have called you so early, Furf, but you said you'd be hard at work when the sun came up."

"I did." His words fell somewhere in that gray area between question and assertion.

"I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed myself last night. I've never been to *La Fleur des Pois* for dinner. Heidi never mentioned you were

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fluent in French. Anyhow, I have to say I misjudged you, and, well, I know I said this last night, but I can't wait to see you again."

"Eh, right — "

"Don't forget. Seven o'clock tonight. I'll be ready. *Au revoir.*" She laughed a conspiratorial laugh and disconnected him before he had a chance to say a word.

"I don't speak French," he mumbled into the dead line, wondering if Cid was bilingual.

Corey scurried down the hall dragging his duffel bag behind him — a slight kid for his age, but he'd inherited Ellen's *chutzpah.*

"Corey, how'd you get home last night?"

"You. Gotta go, Dad, Cid's taking me fishing."

"Wait. Are you sure it was me? I mean, I was the one who picked you up from soccer last night? And the sitter's?"

Corey squinted at him. "It was you, Dad, can't you remember? I don't wanna be late."

Delsey didn't remember anything about a fishing trip. "Go on. Be careful."

He watched through the front window as Corey hopped in Cid's 4x4. They waved as they drove off, Cid's fishing rods jutting out of the sun roof — the sun roof Cid had installed himself — the fishing rods Cid had made from scraps of fiber glass and cork and some old rubber rings he'd replaced on his Remington 1100 automatic shotgun, a process he'd described to Delsey in painstaking detail.

Strange. Disconcerting. Downright bizarre. The soccer game and the sitters and Vanessa and his taxes. There had to be some reasonable explanation. Didn't there?

The phone rang. It was Eidelstein.

"Furf, this is the best damn piece you've ever written. You got it. I'm giving you the cover. And I tell you what, I'll hold the run for you. If you can get me that Velvet Underground companion piece you were so hot about last night, I'll lay them side by side, and pay you triple. You've got to FAX it to me by eleven tonight though."

"Eh, yeah, sure — "

"Talk to you later. Get to work."

Delsey heard the hum of the dead line before he hung up the phone. He

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sat at his desk and booted up his PC, then printed a copy of the article he'd written. Could he really write this well? He recognized his own style, some of the sentence structures and word choices and so on, but the review was more alive than he himself had felt in months — make that years.

Delsey dropped the article onto the blotter and rubbed his tired eyes. He couldn't begin to guess how he'd done it all in one night. The tub...the music...the water...the dream. And nothing. A blank page. He had heard stories (from Cid) about people blacking out, sleepwalking, doing things in the middle of the night they had no recollection of the following morning. Could the same thing have happened to him? What other explanation could there be?

Delsey's washing machine overflowed. He mopped out his basement, packed his car with clothes, and took off for the laundromat. A cop stopped him along the way to hand him a $75 traffic ticket for dragging his muffler. He fell asleep not for a few minutes, but for a few hours on one of those hard orange plastic seats, to the sound of dryers tumbling and the smell of detergent. When he got home he still felt exhausted. I'm *not* a sleepwalker. I'm *not* a schizophrenic. I'm *not* a zombie. I do *not* need to see Vanessa's psychiatrist. He looked for the business card she'd given him but couldn't find it.

Delsey suddenly felt cold, deathly cold. He could feel every muscle in his body tugging at his bones. A hot, relaxing bath, that's what he needed. Desperately.

He filled his tub, sank into the water, and tried to come up with an interesting angle for the Velvet Underground piece he had apparently promised Eidelstein.

Tired. So tired.

Delsey watched the plaster clouds and the fluorescent sun fall away from him.

He swirled downward, slowly at first, and then faster...and faster....

Below him, the drain approached dizzily, like the jaws of a great, drunken sea serpent.

Delsey panicked, clawed for the surface, found nothing to grab but water.

Drowning! Drown — g

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Delsey shot up straight in the cold bath water, gasping for air.

Corey, pajamaed, stood brushing his teeth in front of the mirror. "Sorry I woke you up, Dad. You prob'ly should get up anyways."

Delsey clutched the edge of the bathtub to steady himself. "What time is it?" He shivered.

"Eight o'clock in the morning. Cid's taking me canoeing. You didn't forget, did ya?"

"No, I didn't forget." A lie.

Another night. He'd lost another night. He tried to slow his breathing. His brain ached.

Corey tugged his NY Mets cap over his eyes and flipped up the bill so that only his thin nose and wide smile remained. Solid kid. Rarely shaken. The sight of his old man out cold in the tub didn't seem to faze him. Perhaps he had inherited a bit too much of Ellen.

"Thanks for taking me to the game, Dad."

"Sure." What game?...wait...the baseball cap...Shea Stadium? He must have taken Corey to the Mets scrimmage at Shea. He had always wanted to do that. Drive out and watch some spring training, an inner squad scrimmage where you could walk around the park, shake hands with some of the ball players. Baseball, the perfect father and son activity. He'd just never been able to cram it into his schedule.

Corey darted into the bedroom.

Delsey crept out of the tub, toweled off, and shakily pulled on his robe. Skin like wax paper. Cold, blue fingernails. Incinerator belly. He made the mistake of peering in the mirror, where a pair of bulging eyeballs stared back at him with the same dead gaze as those poor perch Cid had so often decapitated in the backyard.

He set a course for the kitchen, figuring a caffeine fix might pump some life into his veins, but as soon as he stepped out of the bathroom his knees buckled, he teetered woozily, and it was either use the wall as a third leg or get down on all fours and make like an anteater. He pressed himself against the paneling and began to inch his way toward the kitchen. Sweat streamed down the sides of his face. He didn't want Corey to think him ill, so he plopped onto the ottoman at the end of the hall and bravely manufactured a smile.

Cid knocked on the front door, leaned in and said "Hi-ho," and strode

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into the living room. Corey ran down the hall, gave Cid a bear-hug, then dashed outside to the 4x4.

"Don't mind if I keep Corey for dinner, do you, pal?"

"Go ahead," Delsey said. All the better. No need to take chances with Corey.

"Jeez, Furf, you okay? You look like dry dog shit. You getting proper carbs in your diet?"

"Touch of the Beijing flu, I think. Can you keep Corey overnight?"

"Glad to. Better sleep it off, pal. Ever try Chinese yoga? I was reading this article about the *Hui Ming Ching*. Some interesting philosophy. 'Every separate thought takes shape and becomes visible in color and form. The total spiritual power unfolds its traces.' Great healing power if you got the beaner for it. Nice job on the bricks, too. Didn't know you had it in you."

"What bricks?"

"The walk. Those loose bricks you patched on the walk. Got to admit, you surprised me. Did a damn fine job."

"Thanks," said Delsey.

He waited for Cid and Corey to leave, gathered his strength, and went to his desk. He signed onto the computer. There was a new document in its directory. He accessed the file and read his article. "This is better than my Reed review," he muttered to no one, then he laughed to no one, then he whimpered to no one. "Get a grip," he told himself. "You can figure this out."

On his book shelf, next to the PC, he spotted the baseball Howard Johnson and Doc Gooden had signed. Well, at least Corey had enjoyed himself.

Facts: Over an hour to Shea Stadium; two or three hours at the scrimmage; a bite to eat somewhere off the highway. Half the night would have been gone by the time they got home. When would he have found time to write the article? When would he have fixed the walk? Hell, Delsey didn't even know how to fix the walk any more than he knew how to speak French.

Uh-oh. His date with Vanessa. He went to the kitchen, picked up the telephone and dialed her number. "It's Delsey."

"Mmmm, hello, Furf."

"Eh, last night — " He hesitated, waiting for her lead. He was ashamed to admit what he was thinking, what he was hoping she would say.

"Oh, Furf, I never thought it could be so good. I mean — it's not like I'm

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an inexperienced teenager — well — I'll stop, I'm embarrassing myself. All I can say is Ellen is either completely nuts, or half dead. Either way I thank her for it."

"I have to go, Vanessa."

"What? Furf, is something wrong? Is it something I said? I didn't mean to — "

"No, it's just that I'm in the middle of something." He hung up the phone, and as soon as the receiver clicked into place the bell rang again...and again...and again...a dozen times before he could will himself to lift the receiver; it felt like a barbell in his hand.

"Hello, Delsey," the voice said. "It's you."

"Who is this?"

"It's you, Delsey."

He knew immediately that it wasn't a crank call. He recognized the voice. Beyond that, he felt as if he had spoken the words himself. Not literally. It felt more like *déjà entendu,* as if the words had been generated somewhere internally, somewhere within his own mind, and then recycled into sound only after he had heard them.

"What's happening to me?" he whispered into the mouthpiece.

"I called to tell you not to worry. I could sense you were worried. Don't be. You can let go now."

Delsey fell silent. Both of him. "What are you talking about?"

"The change," said the voice. "Cid was right about our next great evolutionary advancement — you remember — a whacky gestalten outgrowth of the body and the beaner."

The change. Delsey could feel it, as if the words had triggered some intuitive realization.

He should have seen it coming a long time ago...finishing chores he had never started and reviewing shows he had never seen and keeping dates he had never arranged and speaking French and patching loose bricks and talking to himself on the telephone and God knows what else. What else? He *was* doing all of this himself.

"How many," he said, an edge to his voice now. "How many of me are there out there?"

"As many as you need," answered the voice, full and rich and breezy all at once.

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"And you?" Delsey said. "Which one are you?"

"I don't know. It's not like that. We're all one, really. We're all you."

"Where were you last night?"

"With Vanessa."

He waited. "Well?"

"You were great. You were better than great. You were the best you've ever been."

"That's ironic." He tightened his grip around the phone. "I couldn't even be there for it."

"But you were," said the voice. "In a way."

"Of course. Of course I was there!" He slammed down the receiver.

Cut off. From himself, from everything. He dropped the phone on the floor.

How much of his life had he spent on the damn telephone? How much of his time had he sacrificed to disembodied communication — FAX machines, computer networks, tape-recorded messages — when a personal appearance simply wasn't possible?

Man had to learn how to interact, Cid had said. What did he mean by that? Was it possible that man had taken an evolutionary leap, had innately discovered a method of crunching himself into ten million bits of information, of packeting himself into microbursts of deliverable data consumable to even the crudest receiving unit, something as crude as, say, the household plumbing — why not? The links had already been established: water pipes. Hundreds and thousands of water pipes extending throughout the entire city, all connected by the central brain, the NYNEX.

Insanity. That, too, loomed as a possibility, but an unlikely one. He couldn't be any more insane than the infamous Bronx Bank Robber, or the doctor from Palo Alto. There would be others, too. It was happening.

Delsey's legs caved in. He collapsed with a thud on the linoleum floor, his moment of clarity already receding as effortlessly and persistently as time.

Cid entered the kitchen then, followed by another Cid, and another. Identical Cids.

"Got a call from one of your Delseys," said one of the Cids. "Told us you were having some trouble completing the change."

The Cids lifted him off the rug and carried him down the hall to the bathroom. One of the Cids opened the door and yet another knelt beside the

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tub, drawing a bath, smiling Cid's composed smile.

Two Ellens stood next to the toilet looking profoundly disappointed. (Some things never changed.)

Three Coreys sat on the floor next to a Cid. "You're gonna be okay, Dad," one of them said. "Cid wanted to wait it out, but I got worried. I was afraid you weren't gonna make it without our help."

"Don't fight it," said one of the Cids. "Once you're liquid-micro-compatible it's easy. If you could just relax and accept things the way they are once in a while, just let life happen, you'd have a much easier time of things."

"I know what the problem is," said one of the Coreys to no one in particular. "Sometimes Dad just plain tries too hard."

"Don't be ridiculous," said an Ellen.

Two of the Cids lowered Delsey into the steaming hot bath water. Delsey looked up and saw himself standing beside Cid, and saw another one of him smiling over his own shoulder, and another arguing with one of the Ellens. (Some things never changed.) "For your information," he was saying, "I had a wonderful time with Vanessa."

Swirling downward....
To the scent of apricot and aloe....
Don't fight it....
Don't...fight...it....
Down,
down,
down the drain he went.

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Allen Steele's novels have brought him to the attention of science fiction fans all over the country. Reviewers have called him the new Robert Heinlein. His novel, Orbital Decay, *won the* Locus *award for Best First Novel in 1989. He has published several novels since, and received many award nominations. His short fiction has appeared in* Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Science Fiction Age, *and many other publications.*

"Shepherd Moon" is our cover story, a touching piece about love and art and outer space.

Shepherd Moon

By Allen Steele

SHORTLY AFTER THE MONTHLY shuttle from Titan touched down at Herschel Station, she climbed into her hardsuit and took the elevator up to the surface. She had made up her mind a couple of weeks earlier — in fact, she had been rehearsing the scene in her imagination for many months now, long before she had consciously reached her decision — yet there was a moment when the outer hatch opened in which she almost backed down.

She loved him. In spite of everything he had put her through, she still loved him. But if she didn't do it now, it would be another eight months before she got this chance again, and if she waited until then, she would surely go insane. It was now or never.

Nonetheless, she loved him....

She involuntarily took a deep breath, and that was all it took: the taste of cold, recycled air, scented with old sweat and the vague machine odor of recirculation pumps. She hadn't smelled fresh air in almost five years, and short visits to the station's hydroponics bay couldn't match the recollection

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of an early-morning pine forest in upstate New York just before the summer sun burned off the fog, and even that memory was quickly fading. She had just passed her sixty-eighth birthday: Not quite an old lady yet, but certainly not getting any younger, and she didn't want to turn sixty-nine on Mimas.

The ground resembled the cobblestones of an ancient street in Italy, except it was dirty, gray ice, scored by myriad craters. Ice, dirt, craters; no hills, no atmosphere, no forests.

No life.

She was beginning to consider herself dead. Her husband...whether he was still alive was debatable.

Guide ropes formed aisles that branched away in all directions. The shuttle stood on the landing pad about a half-kilometer away, two silver barrels squatting on spindly landing gear. She was tempted to head straight for it, but she immediately rejected the notion. She had been married to him for twenty-six years now; he deserved more than a note left on their cubicle's datascreen. So she grasped the ropes and, using them to anchor her against the moon's negligible gravity, hauled herself step by step down the center aisle.

She didn't want to look at the sky. As much as it was his obsession, it was her damnation. She was afraid that if she allowed herself to look upward, she would be lured into the trap that had snared him. So she refused to raise her eyes from the gritty, frozen ground beneath her boots as she pulled herself hand over hand along the cables out to the place where her husband had set up his easel.

She didn't want to go. Her breath panted loudly within her helmet as she struggled against the ropes, each exhalation briefly clouding the faceplate of her helmet. She still loved him. Another step taken; another choice made. She didn't want to go. Her feet felt like dead weights with every step she took. She still loved him, and she didn't want to go....

And suddenly, before she was aware of the distance she had overcome, she was with her husband.

He sat on a metal stool in front of his tripod-mounted easel, his palette strapped to his lap, his back turned to her. The stool and the easel had been bolted to the surface, and more straps around his waist kept him from floating away. Perhaps, she briefly wondered — not for the first time — it might have been merciful if he had forgotten to tie himself down just once, so that a

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random movement such as the restless shifting of a leg might have pitched him off the moon's surface, outward and away....

It would have made all this unnecessary.

He didn't look up from his work. He didn't even know she was here. She took another deep breath, reconsidered one last time what she was about to say and do, and then touched the stud on the left wrist of her suit which opened the comlink.

"Milos," she said.

There was no overt reaction on his part, nor had she expected any. He remained crouched over his palette, his helmet's faceplate turned toward the electronic canvas mounted on the easel. Yet his right hand froze above the canvas, his forefinger hovering a centimeter above the wide black screen.

"Umm...Genevieve? Yes, dear?"

His voice was a distracted blur. He was cordial, yet she knew how much he hated to be disturbed. It had always been like this. When they had lived on Earth, in the fondly remembered years shortly after their marriage, he had locked himself in his studio for days on end, regardless of whether it had been in Rome or San Antonio or Brussels, and when they had followed his new obsession out into space it had been the same, whether he was on the orbital colonies or on the Moon or on Mars. He could be polite, so long as he wasn't bothered for more than a minute....

"I want to talk to you," she said.

His forefinger wavered above the canvas. "Uhh...can it wait?" His left hand touched the palette as he selected another color. "I'm rather involved at the moment."

He had learned to paint this way on the Moon, when he had done his Tycho series. Conventional media were useless in hard vacuum; out here, oils, acrylics, and watercolors either froze or instantly evaporated as soon as they were exposed. But the canvas was linked to the fingertips of his right hand, which in turn was controlled by the palette on his lap. He could thereby fingerpaint his sketches while on the surface; later, when he was in the shirtsleeve environment of Herschel Station's underground habitat, he could printout his sketches and paint over them, using whatever medium he desired.

Other artists had attempted the same thing, and some of them had become competent at the form, but Milos had invented the technique.

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Bonestell, Pesek, Sternbach, Miller, Eggleton, Hardy, Bauch...he had been compared to all the past masters, and had surpassed them all. The new Da Vinci, the critics proclaimed after he had finished the Tycho series. The Rembrandt of the cosmos, they said after he produced his Olympus Mons paintings. After he had rendered his Jovian murals, they had given up on easy comparisons and had begun to use the only term that was still relevant.

Genius.

He was the one and only true master.

"I'm going to leave you," she said.

"Oh. Okay." He gently touched the screen and his finger traced a long red streak down the center of the canvas; he didn't speak again until the finger finished the line. One mistake, even the slightest hesitation of his hand, and the painting was ruined. He would not work any other way, despite the canvas's erase-and-save capabilities. "Then I'll see you at dinner?"

He didn't understand.

"No, Milos. Not at dinner." She hesitated. "I'm leaving you for good." She paused. "Today. Within the hour. I'm catching the shuttle to Titan. A ship is going back to Earth tomorrow and I intend to be on it."

There. It was said.

Milos didn't say anything for a couple of minutes. For a time he simply stared at the canvas, then he slowly turned around until he was looking at her. She couldn't see his face behind the silvered faceplate of his helmet; all she could see was her own distorted reflection.

"You won't reconsider?" he asked.

She was surprised that he didn't ask the reason why. On the other hand, he was not an insensitive man, for all his other faults; he must have picked up on her dissatisfaction, perhaps even before she realized it herself.

"No," she replied. "I've already made the arrangements. When I get back, I'll live in our apartment in Brussels...at least for a while. You can reach me there."

His narrow shoulders moved slightly; he was nodding his head within his helmet. "I see." A pause. "Will you be filing for a divorce?"

A good question. "I don't know yet," she said truthfully. "I don't think so...at least, not if I think you're coming home soon." She shrugged, feeling her shoulders chafe against the inside of the suit. "Call it a separation."

"A separation. Yes." She heard him sigh through the comlink. "It may

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be some time. I have much to do here before I can...."

"Oh, goddammit, Milos, before you can do what?" She pointed at the half-finished canvas. "Complete this painting? Then what? Start another one, and another one after you've finished that? You've painted the same bloody thing sixteen times already!"

She hadn't intended to lose her temper. This was not how she had imagined the confrontation, in all the many sleepless nights when she had lain in bed, listening to the dull murmur of the ceiling conduits as she gazed into the darkness. But here it was; she was shrieking at her husband like an angry charwoman, and despite herself she felt a surge of pleasure.

"When was the last time you made love to me?" she demanded. "For Christ's sake, when was the last time you even looked me in the eye? I never see you, never touch you...you're always out here, painting this damn planet again and I can't take it anymore!"

She took a long ragged breath, hearing her heart banging in her ears. "I want out, Milos," she said, forcing herself to lower her voice. "I want out, and I want out now. And that's all."

But that wasn't all. She had said everything she needed to say, and then some things she hadn't expected to say. She could have walked away. Yet she wanted — she needed — to hear his response.

He was silent for a few moments. "Very well," he said quietly. "If this is what you need to do...if you need to leave me, go your own way...then please do so. I've never stopped you before and I don't intend to do so now. If this is what you wish."

She let out her breath. "That's what I wish, Milos."

"All right, Genevieve." He paused again. "I'll send a message to our bank and have them transfer some money from our account to your own. You'll be comfortable until I get back."

She nodded her head. "Thank you." Hesitation. "When will you...?"

"I don't know. It will be at least another year. Perhaps longer. You'll have plenty of time to chase all those young Belgian studs, eh?"

She smiled, but she couldn't muster the strength to laugh. "You're my only lover, Milos," she said, hearing her voice crack. "I'm too old to go sleeping with art students anymore."

"Just as well. They might give you a disease. Artists are like that, you know."

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The joke fell flat; neither of them laughed. They gazed at each other for a time, their faces invisible to each other behind glass masks. When she found her voice again, it was only as a whisper.

"Why?" she asked.

For a moment he didn't reply. "We are imperfect creatures, you and I," he said at last. "We are born, we live out our short and fragile lives, we grow old and then we die. In a few years, no one will remember if we ever lived at all."

He lifted a gloved hand to the sky above his easel. "But this, my love...this is perfection. It is eternal, it is always changing, and it is perfect. Even if I were to paint it two dozen times, a hundred times, even a thousand, I shall never get it right."

For the first time since she had exited the base, Genevieve lifted her eyes from the ground. Before her, just past the short horizon of the shepherd moon, Saturn was an immense wall across the sky. Mimas was the sixth inmost satellite of the planet's miniature solar system; from this vantage point, less than two hundred thousand kilometers from its swirling cloudtips, Saturn blotted out the stars, larger than anything human eyes had ever seen. Its rings rose vertically as a straight, silver arch, bisecting the vast world, their shadows falling across the red and orange cloud bands which moved in grand, constant fluctuation, never appearing quite the same way twice.

"But I can only keep trying," Milos said, "because it's the only thing I can do."

Saturn was a thing of vast and frightening beauty. There was no way she could compete with it for her husband's attention, and she was tired of sharing.

"Goodbye, Milos," she said. "Good luck."

"Goodbye, Genevieve," he said softly. "Thank you."

There was nothing more to be said.

He turned his back on her, returning his attention to his canvas. She switched off the comlink, but stood there for a couple of minutes, silently watching him. For a time, he stared at the mighty world beyond the rocky shore, visible yet unreachable. Then he shifted on his stool, touched the palette with his left hand, and slowly raised his right hand to the canvas.

She bent down, picked up a chunk of ice, and stood erect. If she hurled it at the canvas, the painting would be destroyed. Indeed, the canvas itself

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would be ruined, its internal electronics disrupted beyond repair; he would not be able to replace it. There would be no point for him to remain on Mimas any longer. He would be forced to go home with her, and they would be together in Brussels....

And he would hate her for the rest of his life.

She let the ice chunk fall from her hand, watched as it floated slowly to the ground. Milos never noticed; his finger moved across the canvas, adding a long daub of magenta to Saturn's face. Yet, as she watched, his finger hesitated for a moment, obeying a tremble of his nerves.

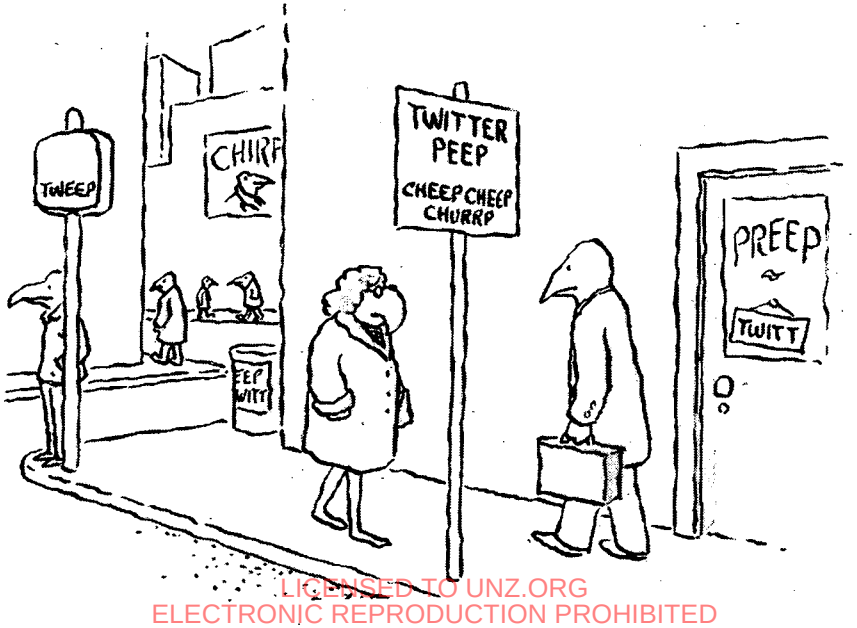
A random, uncorrectable splotch appeared on the canvas.

He lifted his finger away from the easel and stared at it. For a few moments he did nothing...then he touched a stud on the palette and the painting disappeared. Gone forever.

She held her breath and waited.

He sat still, looking at Saturn. After a short time, his finger rose to the blank canvas and, once again, he began to patiently trace the outline of the planet's hemisphere.

"I love you," she whispered. She then turned around and began following the guide ropes back to the base.



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Sometimes we're lucky enough to have seasonal stories in inventory. This usually happens at Christmas time, but is rare for other holidays. I think "Mother to Elves" is the first hard science fiction story appropriate for Mother's Day.

Michael last appeared in our pages with "Catch the Wotan!" (July, 1993). He has published two novels and quite a bit of short fiction. As a part-time instructor at the University of Alaska-Anchorage, he teaches such courses as Science Fiction, Creative Writing, and Dog Mushing.

Mother to Elves

By Michael Armstrong

THE WHEELS OF THE Mandelbrot screen whirled round and round, pixels flickering on and off on the liquid crystal screen, colors shifting as the fractal waves rippled through new equations. Clara, Mrs. Thompson's only daughter and the child of the late Mr. Thompson, God bless his soul, knelt before the screen, staring at the images, fascinated and totally absorbed. Mrs. Thompson watched her daughter, smiled at her and the other children and their parents, waiting as she had waited dozens of times before. She hoped that this time the long trip — the four trolley changes to get across Urbus — would be worth it.

Mrs. Thompson hoped that of all the doctors and therapists in Beyond's only city, that this one, with the tests he had ordered and the odd questions he had asked on their last visit, would finally be able to unlock the strange secrets of Clara's mind. She hoped that he could explain why, at the age of three, Clara had yet to utter one single word, and why she had become such an odd child.

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Clara looked up at the screen with her huge, ice blue eyes. She had a long and strange looking face, but not an ugly strange or a hideous strange face — just different, almost cute, enough so that people often commented on it. Glancing at her mother, and then quickly away when Mrs. Thompson caught her gaze, Clara reached for the screen.

A re-set button lay just within a child's reach on the Mandelbrot generator, which was sort of the idea, and Clara stretched her long fingers and punched the button. The screen flickered to black, and then the cycle started again, a simple wave starting and then becoming more and more complex. Clara tapped the re-set button again, and again, barely waiting long enough for the cycle to start. Then, some chip of logic within the screen's microprocessor shut the screen down, and it stayed black despite Clara's continued pounding of the re-set button. Finally, she sat down, glared at the screen, and turned to Mrs. Thompson.

"Jesus Goddamn Christ, Mother, this fucker doesn't work," Clara said.

"Clara?!" Mrs. Thompson rose as if some rude man had pinched her behind, and went to her child. "Clara!" Her first thought was, Was that all it took, just *sitting* in that doctor's waiting room?

"Holy mother of Mary," Clara said. "God damn it, Momma, this asshole thing doesn't work."

"Clara!" she screamed. "Oh my god! Holy Jesus!"

"Jesus effing Christ," Clara said.

"My god." The other parents looked at Mrs. Thompson, at the strange child quietly speaking obscenities and her mother shouting joyful praises.

A door opened in the wall separating the reception area from the mysterious chambers beyond, and the doctor himself appeared.

"What's the problem?" asked Dr. Ramos.

"My daughter," Mrs. Thompson said, "can speak."

"Goddamn it," Clara said.

"Well." The doctor glanced down at the clipboard in his hands, thought for a moment, smiled, and then looked up. "You're Mrs. Thompson? Your daughter is Clara?"

"Yes, *yes. My daughter can speak.* She's never spoken before! Never! Ever!" Mrs. Thompson waved at her.

"Fucking Hallelujah!" Clara said.

"Never?" Dr. Ramos flipped through the clipboard, then looked at Clara,

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then at the clipboard. "Well of course! It's amazing. She's never spoken until now? It makes perfect sense!"

"It does?"

"Sucking eggs Mary Lamb of God," said Clara.

"Absolutely," said Dr. Ramos, and he waved them both back to his office.

In the doctor's office Mrs. Thompson told Dr. Ramos the story about the Mandelbrot generator, about Clara turning it on and off. He asked Clara a few questions. Clara responded in more complete sentences. Dr. Ramos looked at Clara, at her long, droopy face, at her sweet smile and her eerie blue eyes with the strange star-shaped patterns in the iris. The two Beyond suns shone through Dr. Ramos' office window, lighting up Clara's downy blonde hair and making it glow like a corona. Dr. Ramos punched up her file on his desk slate, slapped a cuff around her arm and quickly checked Clara's blood pressure — high, as usual — and then Dr. Ramos grinned, as if he had discovered a gold nugget the size of a potato underneath the clutter of his desk.

"She's an elfin child, all right," he said. "A pixie person. The proper term is 'Williams' Syndrome.' Clara has all the diagnostic signs: the facial characteristics, the eyes, high blood pressure. Have you had an image scan done? Have you talked to a cardiologist?"

"Cardiologist? No, why...?"

"Well, I'll bet she has a supravalvular aortic stenosis, of course." Mrs. Thompson frowned at the term. "Narrowing of the aorta. We'll have to call the Navy, of course, standard procedure in the case of a genetic treasure like Clara."

"Genetic treasure? Navy? Wait a second, Doctor..."

"It's amazing," he said, almost ignoring Mrs. Thompson. "Incredible! What a find!"

"She's my *daughter.*"

"Oh, yes, well.... She'll be cared for, of course."

"*I* care for her."

"No, I mean.... Well, Mrs. Thompson, let me explain to you what you have, exactly, in your daughter, and why she's so special."

The Navy explained it better.

They came to her home within a week of Dr. Ramos notifying them, via

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a fast cruiser patrolling the sector that had to make six jumps to get to Beyond. Four officers drove out to her home in a private car, and Mrs. Thompson imagined all the neighbors clucking in amazement that night when they reviewed the security tapes of the block. A private car! How rare and special! Hardly anyone could use a car — only doctors, or paramedics, or police officers. Not even Councilors could drive cars! The four officers walked up the short path to Mrs. Thompson's house, all dressed in bright silver uniforms made of some odd fabric that almost glowed with its own light. Dr. Ramos tagged along, nearly ignored by the star sailors.

Mrs. Thompson met them at the door, waving them into her small but tidy house. She kept a neat home, of course, since it was so hard not to, the way homes were built on Beyond, but she had made a point of dusting a little bit more, just to be polite. She spent most of her time at home since Mr. Thompson's death; the pension, and the grant the government gave her to take care of Clara, allowed them a modest living.

Mrs. Thompson didn't know insignia or rank, but the way the three sailors — all men — deferred to the tall woman showed who was in charge. The men carried boxes and various implements, and the tall woman led the way. All of them, of course, had shaven heads except for one long braid at the crown, a style many of the Beyond young had once copied until a starship crew came into town a few years back and the crew clipped the queues. Only the Navy could wear that fashion, it seemed.

She showed them inside and made them comfortable and served them tea. When the pleasantries had been dispensed with, they asked to see Clara, and she brought her daughter out.

"Jumping Jesus, look at those bright guys!" Clara said when she saw them. Mrs. Thompson had persuaded Clara to drop the obscenities but couldn't quite get the religious epithets toned down.

The bright officers smiled, and then the three men opened their cases and began playing games with Clara. Mrs. Thompson had a hard time following it all, but the men seemed pleased and nodded a lot and Clara enjoyed it immensely. They asked her to draw pictures and she drew disjoint lines — a picture of a cat, an eye over here, a whisker at the bottom, two paws in the corner and a big fang in the middle of the page. Then they asked her to describe a cat, and she said, "It's got this mouth with all these teeth, and funny lines all over its fur, with sticky things that go out of its face and a tongue that's

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all rough but pads on its feet all soft. When you rub it, it murmurs monotonously like a rumdum running engine." That pleased them a lot, particularly the alliteration.

"She's an elf, all right," the tall woman said to Mrs. Thompson. "Do you know what that means"

"'Williams' Syndrome,' Dr. Ramos said."

"Right, after the man who first identified the pattern on Old Earth. But do you know what that means to Clara — to us?"

Later, Mrs. Thompson kicked herself for not understanding immediately, but what did she know? What did she understand of starships, of the great long cone-shaped ships that connected mortals with the stars? The starships went off and explored other places and brought back interesting things, or took colonies to places like Beyond, but there were so few starships, and hardly anyone could fly away, that most earthbound souls forgot them while they sailed on their long journeys.

Of course, she understood that to the starfolk the journey didn't take that long, only a few months, but to the planetbound the journey took almost forever. She could still remember when the first ship had visited Beyond — after the one that brought them there — and when it had come again. In all humanity's 210 years of starfaring history there had been maybe a hundred starships launched, and eighty of them still had their original crews. Hardly anyone thought of them, except in the vids, and Mrs. Thompson didn't watch those, since the Beyond Council more or less discouraged video broadcasts. Who had time, with Clara?

So the naval officers explained it gently to her, one step at a time, so when Mrs. Thompson fully understood what they meant to do, she had to believe it.

That Clara had Williams' Syndrome, that she was an elf...to the Navy, that meant one thing: she was special, and they wanted to take Clara away, away into space.

"SPACE," SAID the tall woman, who told Mrs. Thompson her name was Anne, "space isn't quite what it seems. We think we understand it, but what we understand is like the soap that makes the bubble and we can't see through it to the air. You know what makes the bubble and you can see its shape, but

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suppose you didn't understand pressure, or air, or surface tension. You wouldn't understand the bubble, not really." Mrs. Thompson nodded, politely, because she didn't see the point.

Anne sipped her tea and put it down. "It takes a special mind to understand space, to understand the inside of the bubble, the place we take our starships to get to other worlds. I understand that space a little bit, intellectually, I think, but I can't feel it. I could take you into that space but I couldn't get you out. To get out, we need someone who understands it, who feels it. So far, the only ones who can...are people like Clara."

People like Clara? It began to dawn on her, a bit. "She's special, I know that."

"You don't know *how* special. Do you know how many other elfin children there are on *this* planet, in all the known worlds, out of all those innumerable billions of souls? None on Beyond, and of all humankind — barely fifty! Like so many genetic defects, we cured the pool of such problems. Only because not everyone has been completely screened has it been that the gene for Williams' Syndrome still exists. We'd change it back but first we have to find enough elfin children."

"We do not practice genetic screening on Beyond," Mrs. Thompson pointed out. "We're a little old-fashioned, like those Amish back home, only we choose to use the technology of the late 20th Century."

"Except for starships," Anne pointed out.

"Well, a Beyonder only uses a starship once," Mrs. Thompson said, "if at all."

Anne sipped her tea, said nothing. The other officers sipped their tea. When the silence got too heavy, Mrs. Thompson pressed on. She was beginning to understand, but she had to know.

"And these children...my Clara?" she asked. "They can navigate you to the stars?"

"So far, they're the only ones. They are a talent of incredible preciousness and rarity. Only these people can take us...out there." Anne got a look on her face, a look of longing so intense, Mrs. Thompson almost wept.

"You want my child, then?"

Anne nodded. "I will be frank, Mrs. Thompson. I have a daughter I buried last year. One hundred two. I think I understand separation. Yes, we want your daughter."

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"You want my daughter forever."

"No," said Anne. "Only until she retires. Twenty years, maybe. Not forever. That would be slavery."

"For me it will be forever." Mrs. Thompson looked down at her hands, at the flesh still taut and young, at her graceful nails and the long fingers. Harold had died just after Clara's birth, she had been twenty when Clara was born, Clara had been all she had. When Harold had died she had seen her life then, seen that she would have to care for Clara. The Beyond laws had seen that, too, had given her the stipend to care for Clara. Clara was her life, her job, her joy. Her existence. And these men and this woman in the silver suits with the shaved heads and the long braids would take her away, take away her child and destroy her life.

"Twenty years will be a forever, and forever will be too long," she said. "You cannot have Clara."

And she showed them to the door. That, she thought, would be that.

Of course it was not. Dr. Ramos called first. Only later did Mrs. Thompson discover there had been a finder's fee, a reward, a rather tidy sum, it turned out, half payable on finding, half payable on enlistment. So of course Dr. Ramos had some incentive. He was not so blatantly mercenary in his approach, however.

"Did I ever tell you of the prognosis for Clara?" Dr. Ramos asked. He had come by to visit a day later. Once Clara had had a fever, a raging fever, and Mrs. Thompson couldn't get a cab to come out so late and of course the trolleys didn't run then. Dr. Ramos had been on call that night at the clinic — that's how she first heard of him — but Dr. Ramos wouldn't make a house call, even though he could request a vehicle from the village motor pool. Today, though, today on a sunny morning with the buses and trolleys running, Dr. Ramos came out.

The prognosis? Of course she knew. "High blood pressure," Mrs. Thompson said. "She's on medication and it seems to be working."

"It will, too, for a while. I got the cardiologist's report. She fits Williams' Syndrome exactly: a narrowing aorta. It narrows just out of the heart, a dicey situation. The aorta can get clogged. This leads to even higher blood pressure, strokes, things like that. She'll need a new aorta, perhaps, eventually a new heart. We could do a transplant but you know the laws on Beyond."

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"No harvesting of organs."

"Yes. Clara will die at a relatively young age. Without advanced medical care, she might live to be forty. Forty-five. Perhaps fifty. To save her, she'll have to go off-planet. That's rather expensive, you know. Even if you could afford it for her, you couldn't afford it for both of you. She goes off planet, she's gone for at least fifteen of your years — twenty, I think, because she would have to go to Earth."

"That would be fine. I would wait for her."

Dr. Ramos shook his head. "Of course. And you'd be a little older and could still take care of her, at least until you died. You will die before she does in any case, but you would die *sooner* relative to her subjective age. During the time she's on Earth, of course, you would not receive the stipend for caring for her. So you'd have to go back to work."

"I worked before." Mrs. Thompson sipped her tea. She always made tea when these people came over. She liked tea, the one good thing the starships brought with them, black tea from Earth as only Earth tea could taste.

"Oh, you would work the rest of your life, even beyond retirement." Dr. Ramos smiled, and Mrs. Thompson saw a glint of malice behind that smile she hadn't quite seen before. "You would have to pay for the travel, and the surgery, of course. Beyond takes care of its people, you know that, full medical care within our means and according to our principles."

"Of course." Of course — she'd begun to pick up that little speech habit of Dr. Ramos' whenever he visited. She poured him more tea.

"Travel to Earth is outside our means."

"Others in need have gone. There are grants...we've looked into this, Dr. Ramos. We've discussed this before. You said that in such rare cases as this, the Council would appropriate the funds. 'We do not deny our people care,' you said."

"I did say that. I was speaking hypothetically, of course. After I thought some more about the special circumstances of Clara's case, I made some inquiries. A colleague of mine is a Councilor, you know. He said that given the limited funds, it would be unusual for them to pay for Clara's trip. She is retarded, you know."

"*Special!*" Mrs. Thompson raised her voice. "Special. The Navy has said that, and I know that."

"Special to the Navy, perhaps, to starfolk." Dr. Ramos shrugged. "To

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us, to Beyond, to we who never see space beyond the edge of our solar system...retarded. Others have far greater needs. The Council would not send her to Earth."

"I see where this is headed, Dr. Ramos. I understand the reality of the situation — even the corruption of the situation. I am not naive. But I will not be separated from my daughter. Do you understand?"

"Even if she dies?"

"She will not die. What mother would let her daughter die?"

"Indeed," said Dr. Ramos. "I think that is precisely my point." He smiled that grin again, and left.

FOR A time, Mrs. Thompson thought the Navy, and Dr. Ramos, had forgotten about Clara. She quit taking Clara to Dr. Ramos; she had continued going to him because he had a minor specialty in speech therapy. When Clara opened up, Mrs. Thompson had ceased her visits. There were other doctors. None of them pressured her to send Clara off to Pilot's School. None of them seemed to forward Clara's name to the Navy. But the Navy knew...they always knew.

One day, the school where Clara spent her mornings called Mrs. Thompson. A little problem, they said. Nothing to worry about, just a precaution, of course. Clara's blood pressure had gone up, she had seemed a little blue in the face, so the hospital...

Mrs. Thompson rushed into the hospital, biked there on the fast trails because the buses ran late that day, and went into the emergency room all sweaty and flushed. Her daughter lay on a table, tubes running into her nose and wires running from her chest, liquid dripping into her veins. Through all the tubes, Clara smiled up at her.

"She'll live," Dr. Ramos said, smiling and smirking by Clara's bedside. "This is her future, though." He waved at the machines, the limits of Beyond's technology, the technology they had all accepted and desired no more of.

"You bastard. You are not our physician."

Dr. Ramos shrugged. "I was on call. I knew the case. It was my ethical responsibility to intervene." He waved at Clara. "But you see? This is the best we can do. We can only do our best."

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"I will not let her go."

Clara smiled, her pale blue eyes cheerful, her face pale, lips pale. "Tiny tubes tingling through me," she said. "Hello, Mama. I love you."

"Won't."

"Silver man, bright man!" Clara said, pointing at a Naval lieutenant walking into the room. "Bright woman!"

Mrs. Thompson turned, looked at the two starfolk: a tall officer and a shorter woman, the woman in a silver suit like the officer, but with a purple sash around her waist, a long braid down to her waist, also purple, and huge, light brown eyes that looked all the bigger with her head shaved.

A pilot.

"Mrs. Thompson?" the officer asked. "Is Clara okay?"

"Fine," she said.

"My pilot," the officer said. "Ms. Severn. I am Commander Reitan, of the Hospital Ship *Mother Theresa*. We were near system when Dr. Ramos alerted us."

Mrs. Thompson glared at Ramos. "You cannot have her."

The Commander smiled, approached Clara. "Clara? This is a pilot."

"Pretty eyes!" Clara said. Ms. Severn approached her bed, leaned forward, the long purple braid falling across Clara's chest. "Purple rope, rope like the tubes that make me all tingly."

"You feel all tingly?" asked Ms. Severn. She spoke with the same soft voice as Clara, the same intonation.

"All tingly, snaking and snarling and making my insides itch!"

"Itching, twitching, like that mouth of a raw snake?"

"Yes! Holy moly Jesus Mary of St. Bernadette, wow!"

"She's an elf?" Mrs. Thompson asked.

The Commander nodded. "A very good pilot. She's flown the ship since her teens."

"That is what Clara would become?" Mrs. Thompson looked at Ms. Severn, at her dignity and grace and respect — the respect the others held her in, the way they gave her just that much more room, as if she always held center stage and they must step back from her spotlight lest they cast shadows on her performance.

Respect. Clara got respect, respect for her disability, for her differences, but it was a different kind of respect. It was the respect you gave someone who

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could never be normal, the dignity you tried to afford them because you knew it was right, but could never actually grant, because the strangeness of a child like Clara frightened people. Ms. Severn did not frighten people.

"If you so desire," the Commander said. "This is what Clara could become."

Mrs. Thompson watched her daughter chatter with the pilot, watched the way her daughter became animated — despite the tubes, the monitors. Could she deny her this, her chance to be something beyond just a peculiar child?

"Are you here to take my daughter away?" she asked.

The Commander shook his head. "To help her — " Mrs. Thompson frowned; he held up his hand. "No, I mean that. To save her life, to do what should be done, to preserve a precious resource — a potential resource."

"You would just take her up on your ship, heal her, and send her home?"

"If that is what she — you — desire."

Mrs. Thompson glared at Dr. Ramos, shook her head. "He said it would be a great expense..."

"Dr. Ramos did not inform you of all the options." The Commander smiled at the doctor, a cold, tight smile.

"You will take her up to your ship, fix her up, and send her back?"

"At no expense to you. At no obligation."

"Why?"

"To preserve a valuable resource," the Commander repeated, then shrugged. "And, to be honest, in the hopes that you will then be convinced we have only your daughter's best interest in mind, and that you will allow us to educate her to her greatest potential."

"Can I go up with her?" She thought of rising out of Beyond's great gravity well, only for a moment, only for that slight chance.

"We'd hoped you would offer."

Mrs. Thompson had not realized that going up to the ship meant not only leaving Beyond's surface, but going out of its system as well. The Commander had explained it simply: they would do the surgery in system — not replacing Clara's heart, only strengthening her arteries with synthetic patches — and then go to other systems while she recovered. They had other patients to pick up, others to take home, and would return to Beyond in little over a

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month's ship time, two years objective Beyond time. The Commander had personally made the necessary calls to the Beyond administrators, and they had agreed to maintain the Thompson residence as a favor to the *Mother Theresa.*

At the edge of the system, the Commander invited Mrs. Thompson up to the bridge to watch the insert into Other space. The Commander quietly gave commands to the bright men and women huddled over boards and before screens. As the hospital ship moved away from Beyond's furthest planets, past its Oort cloud and toward empty space, the ship seemed to shimmer for a heartbeat, and then enter a moment of extreme calm. The Commander cut the ship's drives, its great engines that moved it through normal space but could do nothing in Other space. Mrs. Thompson had forgotten that feeling until then. The last time she had been on a starship had been the out-migration with her foster parents to Beyond, and she had barely been older than Clara. But she remembered the peace she had felt as the ship made its transit, and the complete calm of the ship.

"It's wonderful," she said.

The Commander smiled at her. "We do this all the time," he said, "and yet every time I forget how soothing this can be. And then I wonder how I can ever forget. But we have to get out — that's the hard part, because we don't know how to leave and first we want to leave. We need to know the precise time to leave. Ms. Severn will take care of us."

The pilot walked onto the bridge then, short and yet commanding in her presence. She wore the same purple suit and sash. Ms. Severn smiled at Mrs. Thompson, at the Commander, but at the same time she seemed distracted, as if she were listening for some sound others could not hear.

She sat in a chair just to the right of the Commander, and as she sat in the chair the chair seemed to envelop her, until only the top of her head was visible.

"Our pilot receives a complete sensory hook-up in her chair," the Commander explained. "She will experience Other space completely, understand it, and then explain it to us. Ah, here it comes."

Lights and read-outs and screens too complex to understand began to glow and flicker and change on the central console before the Commander. Ms. Severn's voice came over the bridge system, altered slightly by the electronics, but stranger still: almost incomprehensible in its absurdity.

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"A hole," Ms. Severn said, "ah, oh: round and flat and wonderfully weathered.... There, the thin thing and the edge along the edge by the diaspora of the melodious match to that thing that's long and narrow and that other thing that puffs like a breath into a steamy system of chairs and hides. Oh! Oh! There's the moment, seize the moment, Commander! On my mark, on my bark on the three trees of the time and the tempest and the tires that go round and round, Commander, turn now, turn now!"

"Drives on," the Commander said.

"Drives forward, a degree there, two degrees, too sharp, too sharp, back off: yes, back, chair, legs dangle into threes, now three degrees, okay, okay, Jose, Jesus fucking Christ, hit it hard, hit it hard, the elephant."

"Full throttle up," the Commander said.

"That's it: now turn," Ms. Severn said. "Flow, go, row, row, exit, fade to black, to pink: out!"

"Engage," the Commander said.

And the great drives kicked in, the calm left, and they returned to real space.

"Thank you, Ms. Severn," the Commander said.

The chair pulled away and Ms. Severn stepped out. "Commander, you have the comm," she said. She came up to Mrs. Thompson and hugged her. "Let's go see Clara."

As they rode the lift to the recovery room, Ms. Severn turned to Mrs. Thompson, and laid a hand on her shoulder. Although Beyonders generally gave each other much personal space — it was part of the reason they came to Beyond, after all: to get both cultural and individual space — Mrs. Thompson did not find the casual touch offensive or threatening. She remembered then Clara's own tendency to hug complete strangers, and how it had been hard to educate her in the rules of Beyond society. Not only did Clara enjoy it, but the victims of her affection seemed to as well.

"May I ask you a question, Mrs. Thompson?"

"Of course."

"Do you have a first name? Everyone calls you 'Mrs. Thompson.'"

"On Beyond we use titles, out of respect and to preserve intimacy. But yes, I have a first name: Beatrice. You may call me Beatrice." It violated all her rules of decorum, she thought. She hadn't even called her husband

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"Harold" until their wedding night. "Please."

"Beatrice...I am Sylvia."

"Sylvia."

"A nice name, Beatrice. The lover of Dante as Virgil guided him through Hell."

"You know Dante?"

Sylvia nodded. "Williams' Syndrome afflicts us in strange ways, you know. We read voraciously, you know, but I do admit I find other tasks extremely difficult."

Beatrice smiled, thinking of how Clara could read at age four — barely a year after she started speaking — but still could barely add two-digit numbers. The lift stopped at the cardiac ward, and Beatrice followed Sylvia down to Clara's bed.

"Bright lady!" Clara said, reaching up to stroke Sylvia's purple braid. "I felt the calmness and the wonder and the funny pink fuzz of it all."

"I could see you in it," Sylvia said. "I could see all the other ships and the navigators and the presence of our brothers and sisters, many more than we imagine." The pilot glanced over at Beatrice, smiled a thin smile, almost a grimace. "Would you like to join us?"

"Oh yes," Clara said, without hesitation. "Absolutely yes! Oh wonderful joy oh yes! Mother, could I? May I, should I?"

"Clara...." Beatrice said. "I..." Mrs. Thompson looked down at her daughter, staples in her chest and glorious plastic holding her heart together, and despite the butchery of the surgery and the pain she must have felt, her daughter had the most wondrous smile on her face. She had always been a happy child, Williams' Syndrome children were like that, she had found out. In that moment, though, her daughter seemed happier than Beatrice had ever seen her. Could she deny her daughter joy, companionship, fulfillment — even duty?

"Excuse me," she said, and ran out of the room.

Somehow Mrs. Thompson found the ship's chapel. A ship named after a great Catholic saint must have a chapel, she thought, and a simple query of the lift took her there. Beyond had its religions and its principles, but few Beyonders adhered to any one faith except the faith of Beyond, so it was not her habit to seek solace in a chapel. Yet this chapel offered calm and peace.

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Neutral in its trappings of any one faith, it seemed to hold the essential elements of all faiths. A window backlit not by any lighting, but by the video recording of a setting sun, gleamed with abstract shapes of cut and ground glass. The shapes seemed to be a Rorschach of images, so that if you stared at the stained glass in one way, it held the image of a man on a cross, or if you looked at it in another way, the cross lost the man and gained an extra arm, or the man became a squatting Buddha, or a woman with many arms, and so on.

In the stained glass, Beatrice saw the face of her child. She saw her daughter grow old, and she saw herself grow old, grow old alone and without a purpose in her life, because her daughter had found that purpose. That Clara needed help because of her condition had caused Beatrice to accept that her major task until her death would be to care for her daughter. Thus, it seemed odd that precisely because of her condition her daughter had made Beatrice's task useless. Beatrice had always seen the flaw in her purpose, though: she knew she would die before her daughter, or at least acknowledged the possibility, and wondered who would care for her then. Now she knew. She knew that this burden had been relieved, and that she could get on with her life. Clara would be safe and cared for and Beatrice could get on with her life.

Only Clara *was* her life.

That was the problem, Mrs. Thompson thought. She saw the truth of it then. The best thing for Clara would be to allow her to fulfill her potential, to go off to space and become a pilot, to share her great gift with the universe. Beatrice rejoiced at the fact that her special child had proven to be special beyond her imaginings, and that her child would become independent, respected, even revered. The awful selfishness of it, the sheer pettiness of it, she was ashamed to admit, was that she didn't want to let Clara go. She needed to care for Clara because she needed to feel needed. Beatrice could not let Clara go because, because if Clara went, her life would be useless, and alone — but mostly useless.

Someone sat down next to Beatrice, and put an arm around her. She flinched at the touch and then turned and saw Sylvia, and smiled. "I have to let her go," she said.

"But you can't," Sylvia said.

"Did your mother, your father have the same problem?"

The pilot shook her head, her long purple braid swishing slightly across

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Beatrice's face. "My parents gave me up for adoption. I was born in a rather backward village on a backward planet. Fortunately, the orphanage recognized my condition while I was still young. My family has always been the star service."

"But someone must have cared for you...a nanny, a teacher."

"I had many teachers, many caregivers. Most of us are raised in the pilot's school. They try to identify us elves while we are still young. It makes the training easier — there aren't so many conflicting models of reality to disabuse."

"But you don't really have any parents? You don't have a mother? A father?"

"No..." Sylvia looked up, and in her bright eyes and bright face Beatrice saw a momentary flash of sadness. "No, no mother, no father."

"So if Clara goes off to navigator's school, she will have no parents."

"Caregivers, yes.... But you're her mother, she'll have you."

"But not at the school, right?"

"I suppose."

Beatrice smiled. "I think I know what to do. We'll have to talk to the Commander, of course, and he'll probably need approval from higher up, but I think I know what to do."

AS SHE SAT in the chair before the Commander, a silk drape over her shoulders, Beatrice smiled at how simple it had been. The rarity of Clara's circumstance — an elfin child who actually still lived with her mother — had presented an opportunity the space service had never considered. The other children had been raised by a succession of nannies and caregivers, but they never had a mother or father, some other person they could bond with for life. In practical terms, Beatrice explained, Clara would need to preserve that bond.

The Commander pulled Beatrice's hair up into a single cluster at the crown of her head, precisely measuring out a circle exactly so wide and centered even on her scalp. He tied up the swatch of hair and let the rest fall loose. With the smooth strokes of a wand-like device he shaved away the rest of her fine blonde hair, the wand automatically destroying the hair cells.

To preserve that bond, Beatrice thought. That had been the key. Even

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elfin children needed mothers. Clara's highest and best purpose was to be a pilot. Beatrice's highest and best purpose was to be mother to Clara. It had been her sole occupation the nearly ten years of Clara's life, and she had not only done the job well, she had done it with joy and pleasure. Why could she not serve Clara in the space service? she asked the Commander. Why couldn't she join, go with Clara, and when Clara had gained a ship, continue to serve the space service by being mother to any elfin children who entered the school without a mother, without a human being to bond with?

The last of her hair fell away, long strands falling onto the silk drape. Across from Beatrice, Clara smiled up at her mother, and giggled. "Bare momma bald momma, momma with white rope on her head!"

"You should talk, Clara." She reached down and tugged at the same colored braid on her daughter's head.

The Commander gathered up the drape and shook the hair onto the floor. He held up an imager, and she looked at herself in the mirror. Beatrice thought she looked hideous, but she knew what the long braid meant, the respect it engendered.

"You're a spacer now, Mrs. Thompson," the Commander said. "Congratulations. We're happy to have you."

Beatrice saw it then, saw her future and Clara's future. She would spend the rest of her life in space, on the school ship where they trained the navigators, the very ship the *Mother Theresa* now sped toward to deliver its two new crew. Traveling in the same general subjective time as Clara would when she got her assignment, mother and daughter would grow old together, see each other often, and never be apart.

Mother to Clara; mother to elves.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

FROM HERE TO ETERNITY

UNTIL lately, only science fiction writers thought about the truly distant future — beyond, say, ten thousand years. Now government is getting into our act.

In earlier columns I described the Pilot Project to bury nuclear wastes in a salt flat in southern New Mexico. I was a consultant for the Department of Energy on the far future prospects of such a nuclear tomb. The biggest aspect of the question is the final, big markers which will warn future generations, all 300 of them, about what lurks over two thousand feet below their bootheels.

I asked a computer-whiz friend how he thought we should mark the site, and he had a quick answer: "Scatter CD ROM disks around. People will pick them up, wonder what they say, read them — there you go."

After I stopped laughing, he said in a puzzled, offended tone, "Hey, it'll work. Digitizing is the wave of the future."

Actually, it's the wave of the present. This encounter made me think of our present fascination with speed and compression as the paradigms of communication.

I imagined my own works, stored in some library vault for future scholars (if there are any) who care about such ephemera of the Late TwenCen. A rumpled professor drags a cardboard box out of a dusty basement, and uncovers my collective works: hundreds of 3.5 inch floppy disks, ready to run on a DOS machine using Word Perfect 6.0.

Where does he get such a machine in 2094? Find such software? And if he carries the disks past some magnetic scanner while searching for these ancient artifacts, what happens to the carefully polished paragraphs, duly digitized on

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those magnetic grains?

Ever since the Sumerians, in communications technology we have gone for the flimsy, fast, and futuristic. To them, giving up clay tablets for ephemeral paper—with its easily smudged marks, vulnerable to fire and water and recycling as a toilet aid—would have seemed loony.

Yet paper prevailed over clay, so that though Moses wrote the commandments on stone, we get them on paper. Paper and now our trusty computers make information cheaper to buy, store, and transmit.

Paper isn't for eternity. But even tombstones blur, and languages themselves are mortal. How to talk across the ages, to call out a warning? How to even get their attention? We have to learn to write largely, clearly, permanently. And largely may be most important of all.

Buildings of religious, emotional, or memorial impact tend to fare well. Cemeteries, for example, hold their own against urban encroachment. One of the striking images as one approaches Manhattan is the broad burial grounds, which remain after centuries, despite being near some of the world's most valuable real estate. In Asia and Europe, temples and churches survive better than the vast stacks of stones erected to sing the praises of more worldly power.

Of course, often they were better built, but as well communities are hesitant about knocking them down. Often, new religions simply adopt the old sites. The Parthenon has survived first as a temple to Athena, then as a Byzantine church, later a mosque, and now it stands as a hallowed monument to the grandeur of the vanished Greeks who made it.

Sometimes conquest destroys even holy places, as when the Romans in 70 A.D. erased the Temple of Solomon. Perhaps some conqueror thousands of years from now would pass by the Pilot Project monoliths, berms and buried rooms (if, indeed, the rooms haven't been exposed, turned into a tourist attraction...). Seeing them as tributes to a society now vanquished, a general might order them all knocked over, buried, their messages defaced.

Something comparable happened many times over as the Europeans moved across the planet a few hundred years ago, rubbing out the religious and literary past of whole peoples. The Mayans wrote on both paper and clay, but nearly all of their work is gone.

Our charge from the Department of Energy was to consider inadvertent *human* intrusion into the Pilot

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Project. An important adjective.

I personally do not think the human species will remain intact for even the next thousand years, much less the next ten thousand. Unless we soon halt progress in biotechnology, and don't recapture the ability to tinker with our own genes, I expect that variants on our Cro-Magnon theme will appear.

Other post-human species will have ways of thinking quite different from our own. Still, even if they have extensive physical modifications (one finger like a screwdriver? a stomach which can digest cellulose into sugars? a better designed back?) I expect they will share the deep programming we primates picked up far back there on the African veldt.

Among that ancient legacy is a set of preferences for particular landscape features. Universally, we share likings because they were adaptive. Such "landscape archetypes" may well be so strong because Darwinnowing for them covered many hundreds of thousands of years as small hunter-gatherer bands made their way across rugged terrain.

Developing consciousness got imprinted while the whole mind-body integration proceeded with dazzling speed. Tied every moment to weather and the wiles of other species, our ancestors sensed themselves as part of a living unity, the wonderful oneness of nature. Our enormous emotional ties to that view are a form of nostalgia, no less powerful for its distant origin.

Pre-humans who preferred the savannah prospered; those who liked swamps or highlands did less well. These "hard-wired" preferences have little survival value today, but in our cerebral cortex, the past shouts and the future can only whisper.

The biologist John Appleton believes three types of cues rewarded pre-humans who could pick them up: hazards, prospects, and refuges. Hazard-rich images or smells reach right into the brain, arousing anxiety that can only be resolved by taking action: the flight-or-fight response.

Taking action relaxes us, dissipates energies, may even bring pleasure. People heavily into this go to scary movies or ride roller-coasters, and get a genuine, evolution-ordained kick out of it. Most of us simply prefer landscapes we recognize, that balance prospect (views) and offer refuge. It's also intriguing if the places invite exploration, i.e., aren't boring.

This kind of thinking goes further, into mythic consciousness. Presumably our evolutionary record is written into our basic internal stories, because once these tales were true. They sit down in the uncon-

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scious, ready to spring out and make surrounding events coherent.

Candidates for these are father, mother, authority, self, childhood, femininity and masculinity, gathering food, eternity, circles and squares (Plato's divine forms, somehow useful back on the savannah), devil/evil, god/goddess/good (note the similarity of these words even in as advanced a language as English), sleep, pain, death, communion. I would add number, space, and time — but then, I'm a mathematical physicist. These may be the very substratum of human experience, how we construct meaning, whether it be in myth, language, religion, art — or artifacts.

Joseph Campbell became famous for popularizing the species-wide myth-themes: virgin birth, the great mother, the creation of All from a chaos of nothing, the fire-theft, the plenitude of Eden and the beauty of paradise, the return of chaos in flood or deluge, the land of the dead, the dying and resurrected hero/god, the great quest journey, the sacred versus the profane, redemption through suffering and sacrifice.

We extract these stories from our environment because we are hard-wired to "see" them popping out, patterns which spontaneously order a chaos. The argument here is that what seems to us to be meaning *in* the world is in fact our projection of meaning *into* the world. But all this came from the utility of such filters, which sort out a savannah-like plain into easy categories.

There are four classes of knowledge to convey at the site: simple ("humans made this"), cautionary ("danger!"), basic ("this is old and technical"), and detailed ("radioactives—leave alone"). The first is essential, because the others emerge only if the site is clearly artificial.

Seen from eye level the whole pattern should strike one in a single glance. (The huge stone circle at Avesbury, not far from Stonehenge, fails to do this. It is not widely known because its stones are small compared to the circle, so one can stand in it and not realize the whole design.) Further, the site will compete with a plethora of all present monuments and an undoubted plenitude to come: statuary from the Civil War and wars to come, stumps from old freeways, the carcasses of banks and stadiums.

Most monuments proudly announce that the great Kilroy was here, so pay respect. The Pilot Project is self-effacing: we were here, so stay away. How can we get that message through, when posterity will by habit expect the usual one?

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Some basic designs emerged. To honor important people or events we erect beautiful, soaring monuments which mirror our aspirations — the pyramids, Cleopatra's Needle, the Washington Monument, even the monolith in *2001*. The waste site has to send the opposite message, straight into the collective unconscious, drawing the eye yet repelling the spirit. Perhaps we could learn from the Holocaust memorial in Berlin which zig-zags, its hard edges offering no comfort or nobility.

Consider the Black Hole: a black basalt slab, unbearably hot from accumulated sun's heat. Laced with thick, crazy-quilt expansion joints like cracks in parched plains, it forbids farming or drilling.

Or the Rubble Landscape: the local stone, dynamited and bulldozed into a crude square pile covering the whole Project. It rears above the landscape, hard to hike through, a place destroyed, not made.

With a bit more trouble, Forbidding Blocks: that same broken stone, cast into mixed concrete/stone blocks 25 feet on a side, dyed black, irregular, distorted. They define a square, with chaotic "streets" five feet wide between blocks.

But the streets lead nowhere and no one could live or farm there. The blocks get very hot, and the whole crudely ordered array massively denies use. Some granite blocks stand out, covered with inscriptions, warnings.

The Plain of Thorns sprouts eighty-foot high basalt spikes, erupting from the ground. They jut at all angles, which can cause cracking and faster erosion. To offset this, perhaps use a Field of Spikes, perfectly vertical, interspersed among the Thorns. If the Thorns can't fall and damage the Spikes, eventually only the Spikes remain, in a field of rubble.

The favorite of many panel members was fifty-foot-high Menacing Earthworks, all radiating outward from the bare site center. These are lightning-shaped, jagged, crowding in on the tiny traveler, cutting off views of the horizon, chaotic. At the open center is the existing Pilot Project concrete hot cell, going to ruin.

Beside it, a vast walk-on world map of all repositories of waste. Also, a map of New Mexico showing this site. The map is of granite and slightly domed, so sand blows off, rain can't pool. A room buried beneath holds details about what lies in the salt bed below, as do four smaller buried rooms beneath the largest earthworks. Inscribed "reading walls" of granite appear throughout the site.

The common ideas here are irregular geometries and anti-crafts-

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manship. This contradicts human archetypes of perfection in our imperfect world, which circles, squares, pyramids and spires echo. Using crooked forms when plainly the designers knew "better" suggests a deliberate shunning of the ideal, a lack of value here.

People value craft, too, so these designs are roughly made, of materials such as rubble and great earthen mounds that discourage workmanship. Yet they are large, important — suggesting that there is no pride or honor here.

This theme should echo through the inscriptions. Awe, apprehension, outright fear — independent of language or culture. Human figures and especially faces, made clearer by using bas relief. A face with hands, sculpted in abject horror, as in Edvard Munch's well-known painting, "The Scream." Or perhaps an eloquent warped face, nauseated.

With the wind blowing through the monoliths, coaxing mournful resonances from their curves, a dissonant and wailing aura should surround the place. Whatever cultures come and go, they should inherit a legend of a spooky, disagreeable place — whether or not anybody knows exactly why it is that way any longer.

Details such as that await the intruder who digs. Each design had a buried room at the center. There would lie plenty of duplicate technical detail, from lists of radioactive elements in the site to a periodic table of the elements itself, for correlation with the notation on the walls.

The buried vault might be plundered, though. Here the Sumerians left us a valuable lesson. Around the third millennium B.C. they began writing on little clay tablets, letting them pile up in such numbers into the Christian era. This left us an unbroken line of hard documents with dazzling detail about religion, beliefs, economics, customs.

Similarly, we should seed the waste site with small, ceramic plates, carrying compressed warnings and information. This could offset vandals who wreck the big, imposing monuments, or natural disasters. As erosion changes, buried plates get exposed: time-released information.

If the locals can read them. But our current languages are not going to make it across the sea of millennia.

Languages change unpredictably. They are so complex that tendencies to simplify one part (say, in grammar, when English shed the masculine/feminine/neutral articles and verb forms) will quite likely trigger complication in another (in En-

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glish, more irregular verbs). Historical accidents bring great change. The main reason that English differs so profoundly from its closest German relative, Frisian (spoken in the northern Netherlands) is that the Angles were invaded by French-speaking Normans, and the Frisians were not.

No artificial language can avoid this, either. Esperanto, which once had about 50,000 speakers, was effectively killed when the U.S. and U.S.S.R vetoed using it as the working language of the U.N. However, there may well be no "natural" language emerging in isolation, as the great past tongues did. Our world is cross-linked by media and travel, so language evolution will be different, sophisticated. How? We can't tell, because we have no general theory of how our amazing verbal arts evolve.

So there will never be a science which predicts future languages, and the problem of writing in the Pilot Project markers becomes immense. After a few centuries, only experts can read even early forms of their own language; we can struggle through the original Chaucer, but forget Beowulf. If there is no great cultural discontinuity, probably a few antiquarians will be able to decipher English or any other current tongue. But antiquarians seldom consort with vandals.

The finders of these many buried messages might not be able to read the languages inscribed, but they might recognize a symbol. Our evolutionary legacy gives us some predispositions to seeing gestalt wholes, so we naturally group objects if they are enclosed by a line. We're sensitive to edges, and pick figures out of a ground readily. Breaking down information from large chunks into bits comes easily to us.

Symbols should play to this. We like narratives, and proved so 11,500 years ago when the big explosion of human sign artifacts began with Spanish Levantine rock art. These were pictographs showing hunters, weapons, clothing, prey, sexes.

Similar simplified line drawings could show stick figures burying the waste, warning others away. Others could present people digging or drilling into the site, ground water flushing through the hole, and then people getting sick, falling down, dying, then others mourning them.

The story should unfold in different ways, touching on the great mythic stories where possible. The Bayeaux Tapestry of 12th century France, the Japanese scroll of "The Mongol Invasion," and the Lakota Sioux picture story "The Battle of the Greasy Grass" (to us, Custer's Last Stand) — all gather their power

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through successive images.

Storytelling is itself a powerful current linking eras. Why not use the oral tradition of the region to carry our warning? The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer made their way to us through millennia as purely spoken stories, after all. Even after they were written down in the 6th century B.C., the final text did not settle down for four centuries. A great saga commissioned to lend mythic status to the Pilot Project might do just as well.

But of course, nobody can reliably order up mythic works. Even if the work survived, told and retold, it will evolve, maybe lose its essential warning function. And experience shows that once oral traditions get written down, they fade as great tales. Books entomb storytellers.

So we are left with a picture story. While a picture may be worth a thousand words, there's always the problem of knowing *which* thousand words are evoked. In just this century, the swastika went from a positive religious symbol of India to the hated Nazi emblem. We want to call across the millennia, "poison — radioactive materials — don't intrude."

The panel considered our most common symbol for radioactive materials, the "uranium" of three ellipses centered on a dot. But this merely describes, doesn't warn. And some people think it's a solar system.

The "radiation" symbol is international: a "trefoil" of a black circle with three vanes sticking outward. But it's not an icon, it's just an arbitrary design, and has nothing about it that relates to the idea of radioactives. Some see it as floral or like a Japanese *mon*, a clan crest. One team member quipped, "Ummm — why are they burying all those submarine propellers?"

The skull and crossbones go back to medieval alchemists, who saw in it Adam's skull and crossed bones promising resurrection. Only later did it come to mean poison, and though it's international, it has problems. In an experiment with three-year-olds shown the symbol, they immediately shouted "Pirates!" Put it on a bottle and they shouted "Poison!"

There is, though, a certain basic horror built into the image of disembodied heads. Steve Harris, a UCLA research physician, pointed out to me that skull motifs evoke a primal primate fear, like fear of snakes. Chimps are alarmed by isolated chimp heads or other body parts. This is understandable in evolutionary terms, since animals that snack on chimps tend to leave such "markers" in their wake. Humans seem to share

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this. (In fact, I'm convinced that Shelley's "Ozymandias" derives some of its power from the great, isolated head image.)

Even if no symbol will probably last ten thousand years, perhaps a cluster of them would help. The "Mr. Yuk," a recently adopted poison warning, is a Happy Face reversed into a scowl, tongue sticking out, eyes squinting. Put that together, say, with a slashed circle, and X'ed out other symbols.

But what to X out? A drilling tower is easily mistaken for a monument itself. A pictograph of a stick figure digging doesn't hit the mark, because in fact nobody could reach the salt bed that way.

A big problem is that exposure to radioactive materials usually takes many years to do damage. One possible way to convey this is to tell a story, starting with a child figure encountering the waste (represented, say, by the trefoil). Then comes a panel with the symbol now on the figure's chest and young, short trees nearby. Next panel, the trees have grown and the child is an adult — lying down, scowling, feeling bad. Simple, direct — See Dick Run From Radioactive Death.

These may help convey meaning after all language connection with us is lost. A few antiquarians may know how to decipher the inscriptions, but wildcatters won't necessarily call on a distant university for help.

Some panel members felt that while the monuments should be discordant, to carry the essential threatening message, they should have aesthetic appeal. "Beauty is conserved, ugliness discarded," one said. The pyramids may have survived in part because they are striking—they alone endure, of the ancient world's Seven Wonders — and the same might prove a useful strategy for the Pilot Project markers. "A gift from our century to the future," one suggested. Another proposed commissioning artists for a large scale environmental sculpture.

Trouble lurks here, I feel. So did panel member Jon Lomberg, who with Carl Sagan designed some of the interstellar diagrams on board the Voyager spacecraft. Even if *we* think our markers are ugly, he said, "How can you be sure it won't be mistaken for art?"

Art is ambiguous. As a universal language it tells little of the artist's intent. Cave paintings of animals don't tell us why they were made. Representational art fares better than symbolic, but the marker designs were quite symbolic, as is most large scale sculpture. Recall how often

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you've heard audiences puzzle over the intent of abstract painters.

Further, said Lomberg, "Even if we could commission some monument great enough to become a wonder of the world whose fame would be carried down through three hundred generations, the very fact that the marker was so impressive could lead to the belief that the purpose of the marker was artistic rather than communicative." A big, powerful sculpture isolated amid desert wastes could be seen as like Mt. Rushmore, a spot with a sole, uplifting message. A tourist attraction.

Art often has no function; it is an experience, period. Even art trying to be ugly, as with the fearful faces, can miss its supposed target. Picasso's "Guernica" wasn't really warning us about the Spanish Civil War. It spoke of a more general horror and anguish.

Worse, art draws a crowd. "We want people to stay away from this site, not travel from distant places to see it," Lomberg remarked. Suppose it draws tourists, come to see the ancient wonder. They need a hotel to stay, which needs water, so it drills...

And does anyone expect that our government can commission great art? It has enough trouble agreeing on mildly interesting but intensely controversial photographers and performance artists. Lomberg remarked that for every successful commission there are a hundred failures, from the Prince Albert Memorial in London ("an architectural laughingstock") to the Airman's Memorial in Toronto, locally known as "Gumby Goes to Heaven."

Lomberg pointed out that much of the art world is anti-scientific, anti-representational, and favors detached, nihilistic work. He doubted that our present art community would be well qualified to create or even select a design that was informed about the many scientific and technical intricacies needed — aspects like encroachment of sand dunes, material durability, future technologies.

Announcing a grand competition for ideas virtually promises that something will be chosen, adequate or not. "They're likely to end up picking a giant inflatable hamburger to mark the site," Lomberg said, grinning.

Suppose further that this Pilot Project does turn out to be the model of future sites. Will the French or Chinese use a marker system — symbols, art and all — like ours? Or will national rivalry rear its head? Two thousand years from now, it will be hard to tell that these variously designed places scattered around the world have some com-

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mon story to tell.

Thus the present, irascible humanity of us all could well propagate into the far, far future. The Pilot Project will not be filled and need marking until around 2030, but thinking about it has begun precisely because we need to mull our way into that inconceivable perspective — a time when not merely we will have vanished, but probably our entire culture. This is the first radioactive sepulcher in the world, and may set the standard for all others, nuclear or otherwise.

This is merely our first conscious attempt to communicate across the abyss of deep time. There will be others, and unconscious aspects of how we present ourselves may be our longest-lasting legacy. The people of that time may know us mostly by our waste — and our planning.

And maybe we'll throw in a few CD ROMs, just for the hell of it.

Comments on (and objections to!) this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717.

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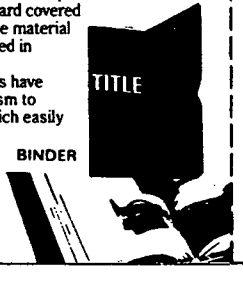

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James Morrow's short fiction has twice won him the prestigious Nebula award from the Science Fiction Writers of America. His most recent novel, Only Begotten Daughter, *won him a World Fantasy Award in 1991.*

Jim has composed a number of Bible Stories for Adults. About this one, he writes, "Before I wrote 'Bible Stories for Adults, No. 20: The Tower,' I'd become accustomed to thinking of the Babel story as an allegory on human arrogance. But when I reread Genesis, I realized that the yarn's main purpose is to explain why humankind lacks a single, unifying tongue. So I visited New York City, did some field work at the Trump Tower, came home, turned on the computer, kicked my cynicism into overdrive, and got to work."

Bible Stories for Adults, No. 20: The Tower

By James Morrow

BEING GOD, I MUST CHOOSE My words carefully. People, I've noticed, tend to hang onto My every remark. It gets annoying, this servile and sycophantic streak in *Homo sapiens sapiens.* There's a difference, after all, between tasteful adulation and arrant toadyism, but they just don't get it.

I've always thought of Myself as a kind of parent. God the Father and all that. But an effective mom, dad, or Supreme Being is not necessarily a permissive mom, dad, or Supreme Being. Spare the rod and spoil the species. Sometimes it's best to be strict.

Was I too strict with Daniel Nimrod? Did I judge the man too harshly? My angels don't think so; they believe his overbearing vanity — Nimrod the *enfant terrible* of American real estate, slapping his name on everything from Atlantic City casinos to San Francisco condos — merited the very comeuppance he received. Hear My tale. Decide for yourself. I will say this. As divine retributions go, it was surely My most creative work since the locusts, lice, flies, murrain, blood, boils, dead children, hail, frogs, and darkness. And

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here's the kicker, people: I did it with language alone.

As I said, I must choose My words carefully.

We all must.

Listen...

Like so many things in Michael Prete's safe, comfortable, and unenviable life, this began with the telephone. A crank call, he naturally assumed. Not that he was an atheist, nor even an agnostic. He attended Mass regularly. He voted for Republicans. But when a person rings you up claiming to be God Almighty, you are not automatically inclined to believe him.

There were ambiguities, though. For one thing, the call had come through on the private phone in Michael's bedroom and not on the corporation line in his study. (How could a common lunatic have come into possession of those seven heavily guarded digits?) For another, the caller was claiming to be the very same anonymous eccentric who, back in '83, had agreed to pay out twelve thousand dollars, twelve times a year, for the privilege of occupying the Nimrod Tower penthouse. The man had actually raised the rent on himself: an additional thousand a month, provided he could move in immediately, even though the Tower atrium was still festooned with scaffolding and cloaked in plywood panels.

"Come to the penthouse," the mystery voice told Michael upon identifying himself as the Lord God of Hosts, the King of the Universe, the Architect of Reality, the Supreme Being, and so on. "Nine P.M. sharp." The voice was high, brittle, and cosmopolitan, suffused with the accentless accent of the excessively educated. "We must talk, you and I."

"About what?"

"Your boss," the voice replied. "You know more about Daniel Nimrod than does anyone else on the planet, including that overdressed mistress of his. There's quite a lot at stake here: the destiny of the earth, the future of mankind, things like that. Bring a calendar."

"If you're really who you say you are," ventured Michael, intent on catching the crank in a manifest lapse of logic, "why are you living in Nimrod Tower?"

"You think God Almighty should be living in a lousy Holiday Inn? What kind of jerk do you think I am? Nine P.M. sharp. So long."

Michael slipped into the green velvet suit he'd recently acquired at

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Napoleon's, snatched up his Spanish-leather valise from Loewe's, and descended fifteen floors to street level. Within seconds a Yellow Cab, dome lit, came rattling down Lexington Avenue, pushing through the squalls of snow. (Every year at this time, the same idea haunted Michael: I deserve my own chauffeur—I've earned it.) He flagged down the cab and climbed into the cozy interior, its seats redolent of oiled leather and surreptitious sex. "Nimrod Tower," he told the driver, a Rastafarian with a knitted cap and gold tooth. "Fifth Avenue and—"

"I *know* where it is, mon — why else you fine folks be paying me, if not to know? Why else you be giving me such a fat and juicy tip on top?"

They crossed Madison, swung left onto Fifth. February already, but the city still seemed Christmasy: the red and green of the traffic lights, the swirling snow. At Fifty-sixth the Jamaican pulled over. "Door to door, eh, mon?" he said cheerfully, musically. Michael paid the $9.50 on the meter, adding a generous three-dollar tip.

He recognized the security force immediately, Manuel and Jake, the former a tall, spindly, grim Puerto Rican who spoke no English, the latter a self-confident and raffish African-American, both wearing the gaudy crimson tunics Mrs. Nimrod had imported from Baghdad. By day the Tower's guards functioned mainly as treats for the tourists, a touch of the Arabian Nights in midtown Manhattan, but after eight the show ended, and any underclass scum attempting to breach the skyscraper quickly discovered that these men were real guards equipped with genuine guns.

"*Buenas noches,* Señor Prete," said Manuel morosely, his pith helmet shining in the roseate light spilling from the atrium.

"What's new with the Poobah?" asked Jake, grimacing. A two-foot-high bearskin busby sat atop his head like a treed possum.

"He's in Japan," said Michael.

"Buying it?" asked Jake, sniggering.

"Not exactly," said Michael, for it was merely the Island of Yaku Shima that Mr. Nimrod intended to buy.

Michael entered the atrium — a dazzling space, epic, echoey, and grand, agleam with polished bronze trimmings and florid Breccia Perniche marble. Boarding the UP escalator, he ascended though the tiers of polyglot shops. Level A, Loewe's of Spain; Level B, Jourdan's of France; Level C, Beck's of Germany; Level D, Pineider's of Italy. Michael's own stooped self glided by,

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caught in a panel of gleaming copper — his hunched shoulders, receding hairline, pinched sad-eyed face. He got off on E, the floor from which the multi-speed, indoor waterfall, at the moment set on *Slow*, commenced its perpetual plunge. Marching past Norman Crider Antiques, he flashed his corporation pass to the Vietnamese guard and stepped into the open elevator.

The penthouse commanded the entire sixty-third floor. A castle in the clouds, Michael mused as he rose, his eardrums tightening with the force of his ascent. A San Simeon of the sky, he decided, disembarking. The front door, a slab of glossy oak, held a bronze ring threaded through the nostrils of a minotaur. He grasped the ring and knocked.

God answered. At least, that is who the penthouse's occupant claimed to be. "Hi, I'm God," he said amiably, "into macroevolution, quantum mechanics, and Jewish history." Those cosmopolitan tones again, filtered this time through the pressure in Michael's ears.

"Michael Prete."

"I know," said the alleged deity. "Everything," he added. With his dusky skin, Price Valiant haircut, and deep chocolate eyes, he seemed to be of no particular nationality, and his age and gender were likewise indeterminate. A mildly feminine bosom bulged the top of his white silk smoking jacket.

They shook hands.

"I suppose you'd like some sort of proof," said the penthouse's owner in a subtly chiding voice. He led Michael into a parlor paved with carpeting so soft and thick it was like walking on a vast pat of butter. "I suppose you expect a sign." They moved past a Steinway grand piano to a tract of window the size of a squash court. "*Voila*," said the rich man, gesturing toward the stormswept city below.

Being God, I was able to give Michael Preté several signs that night. First I made the blizzard disappear. *Whoosh, poof*, and suddenly it was a sweltering summer night in New York, not a smidgeon of slush, not one snowflake. The thermometer read 91 degrees Fahrenheit.

Michael was impressed, but his skepticism vanished completely only after I filled the nocturnal sky with phosphorescent seraphim singing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and the streets with platoons of cherubim giving out roast turkeys to homeless alcoholics.

I changed everything back, of course. Restored the season, recalled the

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turkeys, sent the angels home, wiped all trace of the event from the collective consciousness. If You intervene too profusely in Earth's affairs, I've noticed, the inhabitants end up wandering around in a state of chronic distraction, and they forget to worship You.

"Would you like a drink?"

"Y-yes. A d-drink. Please." Michael was so badly shaken he'd dropped his Spanish-leather valise on the rug. "Are you really *God*? God Himself?"

"Ever since I can remember."

"This is hard to take. You can understand that, right? Do you have any brandy, God, sir?"

The Almighty strolled to His mahogany bookshelves and took down two sparkling cognac glasses and a crystalline decanter containing a honey-colored liquid. "I want you to come clean about something. A confession, if you will. Given that you're a practicing Catholic, perhaps I should summon a priest..."

"Depends on the sin," Michael mumbled, glumly pondering the strong possibility that he had lost his mind. "If it's venial — "

"You hate Daniel Nimrod, don't you?" God asked abruptly as He filled both glasses with brandy.

Michael gasped so profoundly his clogged ears popped. "It's not a bad situation, this life of mine. Really. Yes. I've got my own apartment on Lexington Avenue with a dishwasher and a rear-screen TV."

"He makes you call him 'sir.'"

"He doesn't *make* me."

"He sounds pompous."

Michael sipped cognac. "Anybody who's achieved as much as Mr. Nimrod — a person like that has a right to be keen on himself, don't you think?"

"You're envious. Your insides are bright green, I can see them from here. He's got his yacht and his concubines and his name in *Fortune* every month, and what have you got, Prete? You can't even get a *date*. Never mind. We'll change the subject. What can you tell me about Nimrod Gorge?"

Michael knotted up; he sweated as if caught in the ersatz summer God had recently imposed on Manhattan. "I'm not free to discuss that particular project."

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"And Nimrod Mountain — another secret? Your boss fancies seeing his name on things, doesn't he? He's a man who likes to leave his mark." God sat down on His revolving piano stool and began pecking out "Chopsticks" with His index fingers. "I want to meet with him. Face to face. Here."

"He'll be back from Japan in two weeks." I've gone insane, Michael decided, retrieving a cowhide-bound appointments book from his valise. Only certifiable schizophrenics showed meetings with God on their calendars. "How does Saint Patrick's Day sound?" he said, scanning March. "We can squeeze you in at ten."

"Fine."

In the March 17th square, Michael wrote, *10 A.M. — God.* "May I inquire as to the topic?"

"Let me just say that if your boss doesn't learn a bit of humility, a major and unprecedented disaster will befall him."

To Michael Prete, "Chopsticks" had never sounded so sinister.

GOD KNOWS why Michael experienced no trouble convincing his boss he had an appointment with Me.

He experienced no trouble because being contacted by Yours Truly is a possibility that a man of Daniel Nimrod's station never rules out entirely. Indeed, the first thing Michael's boss wanted to know was why *God* was calling the shots — why couldn't they meet at Sardi's instead? Whereupon Michael attempted to explain how the skyscraper was intrinsically suitable to such a rendezvous: God might own the earth, the firmament, and the immediate cosmos, but Nimrod and Nimrod alone owned the Tower.

Never underestimate the power of words. When I appointed Adam chief biologist in Eden — when I allowed him to call the tiger "tiger," the cobra "cobra," the scorpion "scorpion" — I was giving him a kind of dominion over them. For the tiger, cobra, and scorpion, meanwhile, Adam and his kind remained utterly incomprehensible, that is to say, nameless.

Nimrod bought his secretary's words. The meeting would occur when and where I wished.

Screw the Irish, thought Michael. Screw their crummy parade. Everywhere the chauffeur turned, a sawhorse-shaped barrier labeled *N.Y.P.D.*

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blocked the way, channeling the limousine along a byzantine detour that eventually landed them in United Nations Plaza, a good ten blocks south of the Tower.

Mr. Nimrod, smooth, cool Mr. Nimrod, didn't mind. As they started back uptown, he stretched out, sipped his Bloody Mary, and continued asking unanswerable questions.

"Do you suppose He'll let us drop His name?" The boss's boyish face broke into a stupendous grin — the first time Michael had seen him happy since the Yaku Shima deal fell through. "Word gets around who's up there on the sixty-third floor and *bang*, we can double everybody's rent overnight."

"I believe He prefers to retain a certain anonymity," Michael replied.

"What do you think He's selling?"

"I don't think He's *selling* anything." Michael looked Nimrod in the eye. Such a vigorous young man, the secretary thought. How salutary, the effects of unimaginable wealth. "I got the impression He regards you as, well..."

"Yes?"

"Ambitious."

The boss shrugged. "It's a big universe," he said, mixing a second Bloody Mary. "Hey, maybe it's not stuff at all — maybe it's a service. You think He's selling a *service*, Michael?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know — immortality or something."

"I wouldn't want to guess."

"Photosynthesis?"

"Don't ask me, sir."

Even after they exited the limo and started through the atrium, the boss continued to drive Michael crazy. Nimrod lingered in the stores, reveling in the clerks' astonished gasps and bulging eyes: good God, it was *he*, the great man himself, strolling amid the goods like an ordinary Fifth Avenue shopper — like a common millionaire. At Beck's he stopped to admire a $2300 Nymphenburg chess set; at Asprey's he inspected a $117,000 clock studded with cabochon rubies and lapis; at Botticellino's he bought his newborn nephew an $85 pair of blue suede baby shoes. It seemed to Michael nothing short of a miracle that they arrived at the threshold of God's pied-à-terre only thirty-two minutes behind schedule.

Although their Host came to the door wearing a relaxed and cheerful

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expression, Michael remained uneasy. God had dressed with dignity — mother-of-pearl business suit, white cotton shirt, beige moire tie — whereas Nimrod's primrose-yellow trousers and open turquoise shirt radiated a casualness that, Michael feared, bordered on the irreverent.

Nimrod shook the Almighty's hand. "Your reputation precedes You."

"As does yours," said their Host, eyelids on a snide descent.

God guided His guests into the parlor. An array of hothouse orchids and force-fed dahlias now decorated the lid of the Steinway.

"I have a gift for You, God," said Nimrod. "May I call you God?"

The Almighty nodded and said, "May I call you Daniel?"

"Certainly." Nimrod snapped his bejeweled fingers. Michael popped open his Spanish-leather valise and drew out a copy of *Paydirt: How to Make Your Fortune in Real Estate.* "Shall I include a personal message?" Nimrod asked.

"Please do," said God. "And permit Me to reciprocate," He added, removing a New International Bible from His mahogany bookshelves.

The two of them spent a protracted minute inscribing their respective books.

"Saturn," said Nimrod at last.

"Huh?" said God.

"That's the snazzy one, right? The one with the rings?"

"Jupiter's got a ring too," God noted. "Even the *Wall Street Journal* carried the news."

"I'll give you seven hundred and fifty," said Nimrod. "Eight hundred if we can close the deal before the month is out."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Saturn — Saturn for eight hundred million dollars."

"Saturn?"

"I'm going to build on it," Nimrod explained. "Once I close the Canaveral deal, I'll be jamming more tourists into space in a single day than Paris sees in a whole *year.*"

At which point Michael felt obliged to step in. "Correct me if I'm wrong, God, sir, but isn't Saturn merely a ball of gas?"

"I wouldn't say 'merely,'" He replied, sounding a tad miffed, "but, yes, the terrain isn't anything to get excited about. The idea behind Saturn was the rings."

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"Then the deal's off," said Nimrod, slamming his open palm on the Steinway.

"The deal was never *on*, you son of a bitch," He said, striding toward His picture window. The glass was swathed in thick acetate drapes the color of pistachio nuts. "I didn't ask you here to make any *deals*."

Michael glanced furtively at Nimrod. The boss didn't bat an eye. Damn, he was one nervy entrepreneur.

"I understand you have some big plans," said God, yanking on a gold rope. The drapes parted on a spectacular view of Saint Patrick's Day celebrants lining Madison Avenue, waiting for the parade to appear. "I hear there's a Nimrod Gorge in the works."

The boss flashed Michael an angry, stabbing stare, a look to turn blood to ice, flesh to salt. "Certain people should learn to keep their mouths shut," Nimrod muttered.

"Your secretary divulged nothing," noted the Almighty.

Nimrod joined Him at the window. "You *bet* there's a Nimrod Gorge in the works, God, and it'll make the Grand Canyon look like a pothole. Listen, if you're one of those environmental-impact types, you should realize we're using nothing but conventional explosives for the excavation."

The brassy, blaring *forte* of a marching band wafted into the room.

"There's also going to be a Nimrod Mountain," said God.

"Rather like the Gorge," said the boss, "only in the opposite direction."

The Almighty laid His palm against the window. The parade was in sight now, sinuating down the street like a long green python.

"I want you to drop all such plans," He said.

Bending over slightly, Nimrod scowled and bobbed his head toward God, as if he couldn't quite believe his ears. "Huh? Drop them? What do you mean?"

"You can start by shutting down this vulgar and arrogant Tower."

"Vulgar?" Nimrod echoed defensively. "*Vulgar*?"

"Pink marble and burnished bronze—who do you think you're kidding? This place makes Las Vegas look like a monastery."

"God, I'll have you know we've got nothing but raves so far. *Raves*. The *Times* architecture critic positively *flipped*."

The Almighty removed His palm from the glass, leaving behind a mark suggesting a fortune teller's logo. "Have you checked the prices down there

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lately? Thirty-five dollars for a T-shirt from Linda Lee's, three hundred and fifty for a salt-and-pepper set from Asprey's, twenty-one thousand for a gold evening bag from Winston's — really, Daniel, it's *offensive.*"

"Merchants charge what they can get," Nimrod explained. "That's how the system works."

"So you refuse to close up shop?"

"What's the matter — don't you believe in progress?"

"No," said God. "I don't." He tapped the inscribed Bible in Nimrod's hand. "The last time your species got out of line, I was moved to sow seeds of discord. I gave you all different languages."

"Yes, and the whole arrangement's been a complete pain in the ass, if You want my opinion," said Nimrod, brandishing his New International Bible, "especially when it comes to dealing with Asians."

"I sympathize with your frustration," He said, sidling onto His piano stool. "In fact, there's probably only one thing worse than not being able to understand a person."

"What's that?" asked Nimrod.

"Being able to understand him completely."

A thoughtful frown crinkled the boss's brow. "Oh?"

Pivoting, God faced Michael and stretched out his right hand, eyes burning like two meteors smashing into air. The slightest brush from the Almighty's extended index finger was all it took, the merest *touché,* and a white, viscous light suddenly flowed through Michael's brain, seeping into his cortical crannies and illuminating his powers of articulation.

"Go ahead," He commanded Michael. "Speak."

"What should I say?"

"Just talk."

"D-Daniel..." Michael winced: he'd never called the boss *Daniel* before. "Daniel, the plain fact is that you harbor feelings of insecurity bordering on paranoia," he found himself saying. Complete understanding...total lucidity...yes, it was really happening — for the first time in his life, Michael could truly communicate.

"Feelings of *what*?" said Nimrod.

"Insecurity."

The boss's puckish features grew tense and flushed, as if he were suffering from apoplexy. "Well, *this* day's certainly shaping up to be a pisser,"

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he said, tugging on the 14-karat gold chain around his neck. "First *He* turns against me, now *you*. Really, Michael, after all I've —"

A froggish *glunk* issued from Nimrod's throat as the Almighty laid a divine hand on his shoulder. The entrepreneur squeezed his head between his palms and, stumbling across the lush carpet, dropped to his knees as if intending to pray.

God said, "Your turn, bigshot."

The boss raised his thickly tufted head and gave a meandering smile. Slowly, cautiously, he planted his two-hundred-dollar wingtips from Biagiotti's on the carpet and rose to full height. "If Freud were here, he might infer my problems have a sexual etiology," said Nimrod in measured tones. "He would probably note the phallic implications of my skyscraper. I hope I'm being clear."

"You're being extremely clear," said Michael, putting on his overcoat.

"Clarity — that's the whole idea," said God.

"Where're you going?" asked Nimrod.

"I'm afraid that in a teleological cosmos such as the one we evidently occupy," said Michael, tucking the valise under his arm, "I can no longer rehabilitate any actual truth from the highly circumscribed domain of real estate transactions." He started into the foyer. "And so I'm off into the great wide world, where I hope to gain some insight into the nature of ultimate reality."

"The fact is, I've never been entirely certain I love my mother," said Nimrod, scowling profoundly. "Jung, of course, would project the discourse onto a more mythic plane."

"Daniel, I know exactly what you mean," said Michael.

And he did.

Last night I reread Genesis. On the whole, I find it well-written and poetic. I particularly like My use of the Omniscient Narrator.

Don't ask Me why I found the Shinarites' Tower so threatening. I simply did. "And now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do," I prophesied. My famous curse followed forthwith. "Let Us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."

But that didn't stop them, did it? They still did whatever they liked.

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This time around, I got it right.

• • •

Hopping aboard the escalator, Michael began his descent. As the shops glided by, he realized that an uncanny anomie had overtaken the atrium. Instead of selling Italian sportswear, the employees of Biagiotti's had convened a colloquy on Dante. Instead of purchasing French shoes, the crowd in Jourdan's was holding an impromptu encounter group. "The thing of it is," a teary-eyed young man croaked as Michael bustled past, "I still love her." To which an aging matron replied, "We could tell, Warren — we could just *tell*."

A shocking and spectacular sight awaited Michael as he swung through the revolving door and stepped onto Madison Avenue. The crowd had turned against the parade — against Saint Patrick's Day *per se*, it seemed. They were attacking the marchers with bricks, showering them with broken bottles, beating them with lead pipes. Screams zagged through the sharp frigid air. Wounds blossomed like red carnations.

From his post by the Fifty-sixth Street entrance, the security man, Manuel, contemplated the chaos with a bemused expression.

"With what meaning do you invest this disturbance?" Michael asked, rushing up.

The Irishmen were fighting back now, employing every weapon at hand — batons, harps, trumpets, ceremonial shillelaghs. "The spectators have deciphered the parade's subtext," Manuel replied. He had shed his accent — or, rather, he had traded his Puerto Rican lilt for a nondescript succession of nasal, mid-Atlantic inflections. "Such a festivity says, implicitly, 'At some nonrelativistic level we Irish believe ourselves to possess a superior culture.'"

"I didn't know you spoke English," said Michael.

"A sea change has overtaken me." Manuel adjusted his pith helmet. "I have become mysteriously competent at encrypting and decoding verbal messages."

At which point a refugee from the besieged parade — a drum major in a white serge uniform decorated with green shamrocks — staggered toward the Tower entrance. Pain twisted his face. Blood slicked his forehead.

Manuel leveled a hostile glance at the intruder, then lightly touched the sleeve of Michael's overcoat. "Now please excuse me while I shoot this approaching drum major in the head. For you see, Mr. Prete, I find myself in fundamental agreement with the mob's interpretation, and I take concomi-

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tant offense at the tacit ethnocentrism of this event."

"Excuse me," said the drum major, "but I couldn't help overhearing your last remark. Do you really intend to shoot me?"

"I understand how, from your perspective, that is not justifiable praxis on my part." Manuel drew out his Smith & Wesson.

"Let me hasten to aver I am no longer conspicuously ethnic." The drum major wiped the gore from his brow. "You'll note, for example, that I've lost my brogue. In fact, I've started talking like some self-important Englishman."

"The issue, I suppose, is whether our newfound homogeneity truly mitigates the nationalistic fanaticism I was about to counter via my revolver."

"Surely you no longer have a case against me."

"*Au contraire,* does it not occur to you that I am suddenly free to hate your very essence, and not merely your customs, clothing, and speech? Am I not still obliged to fire this gun, acting out of those pathological instincts that are the inevitable Darwinian heritage of all carnivorous primates?"

"Now that you put it that way..."

"Ergo..."

As soon as the bullet departed the barrel of the revolver, messily separating the Irishman from his cranium, Michael began a mad dash down Fifth Avenue.

"I wish to effect an immediate exit!" he yelled, pulling back the door of a waiting cab. "Please cross the Hudson posthaste."

The Rastafarian driver looked Michael squarely in the eye. Amazingly, he was the very same cabbie who'd shuttled Michael to his initial interview with the Almighty.

"Judging by the desperation in your voice," said the Jamaican, "I surmise it is not New Jersey *per se* you seek, but, rather, the *idea* of New Jersey" — the man's musical accent had completely vanished — "a psychological construct you associate with the possibility of escape from the linguistic maelstrom in which we currently reside. Am I making sense?"

"Entirely," said Michael. All around him, the air rang with the clamor of coherence and riot. "Nevertheless, I earnestly hope you will convey me to South Hoboken."

"The Holland Tunnel is probably our best option."

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"Agreed."

The cabbie peeled out, catching a succession of green lights that brought them through the Forties and Thirties, all the way to Twenty-ninth Street, where he cut over to Seventh Avenue and continued south. Another lucky run of greens followed, and suddenly the tunnel loomed up. No toll, of course, not on this side. The city did everything it could to encourage emigration.

The cabbie slowed down, maneuvering his vehicle toward a corral of yellow lane markers shaped like witches' hats.

"You aren't going through?" Michael asked.

The former Rastafarian sideswiped a rubber cone, stopped his cab, and smiled. "Consider the dialectics of our present situation. On the one hand, I am a hired chauffeur, with the plastic wall between us symbolizing the economic and material barriers that separate my class from yours. On the other, I exert a remarkable degree of control over your destiny. For example, through malign or incompetent navigation I can radically inflate your fare. The tipping process involves similar semiotic ambiguities."

"Quite so," said Michael. "If I underpay you, my miserliness might be construed as racism."

"Whereas if you overpay me, you are likewise vulnerable to the charge of bigotry, for such largesse conveys a tacit message of condescension."

"To wit, you aren't taking me to South Hoboken."

"I'm leaving my dome light off and driving directly to the New York Public Library, where I hope to discover what, if anything, Marx had to say about taxicabs. Would you like to accompany me?"

"I believe I'll get out here and solicit the services of another driver."

But there were no other drivers. As the afternoon wore on, it became obvious that a massive and spontaneous taxicab strike had overtaken the city, a crisis compounded by an analogous paralysis within the subway system. Even the pilots of illegal, maverick cabs, Michael learned, had begun pondering their heretofore unconsidered niches in the ecology of power politics and public transportation.

He proceeded on foot. Slowly, gingerly, he entered the Holland Tunnel, moving past the thousands of dingy white tiles coating the walls. His caution was unnecessary; there was no traffic. Not one car, bus, van, pickup, semi-rig, recreational vehicle, motorcycle.

At last he saw a faint, cheerless glow. Two women stood on the safety

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island, a grizzled bag lady and an attractive Korean toll collector, communicating with intensity and zest. Stumbling into the crisp, cold daylight, Michael Prete drew a deep breath, rubbed his rumbling belly, and began to wonder from whence his next meal would come.

So My plan is working. Half the planet is now a graduate seminar, the other half a battleground. Afrikaners versus Blacks, Arabs versus Jews, Frenchmen versus Britishers, collectivists versus capitalists: every overtone of contempt is being heard now, every nuance of disgust is coming through. Plagued by a single tongue, people can no longer give each other the benefit of semantic doubt. To their utter bewilderment and total horror, they know that nothing is being lost in translation.

As for Nimrod himself, he has long since left the island. Like most Americans, he is presently operating at a Stone Age level of efficiency. He rides around Jersey on the ten-speed bicycle he stole from an asthmatic teenager in Bayonne. This morning, goaded by hunger, he broke into a sporting goods store, grabbed a fiberglass hunting bow and a quiver of arrows, and pedaled off toward the Delaware Water Gap. He hopes to bag a deer by nightfall. Lots of luck, Danny.

Like I said, I got it right this time. I've won. No more tasteless skyscrapers. No more arrogant space shuttles or presumptuous particle accelerators. Damn, but I'm good. Oh, Me, but I'm clever.

I guess that's why I've got the job.

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A little over a year ago, Marc Laidlaw became a father. Although his daughter has taken much of his time, he still has a moment or two for writing. St. Martin's Press has published his next novel, The Orchid Eater, *and he has sold another. He says he wrote "The Black Bus" late at night, after his daughter went to sleep.*

It certainly is a late night story, one that should be read with all the lights on. About the work itself, Marc writes, "I used to ride a bus like the Black Bus frequently. Social microcosms, of which such buses are prime examples, naturally suggest stories. My 'Group' and its pilgrims were obviously inspired by the Grateful Dead and its cult, but those who suspect that I'm even remotely a Dead-Head should take note of the fate I assign to my poor band."

The Black Bus

By Marc Laidlaw

DRIVER APPROACHED THE main gates, hunched low against the cold clouds and the eerie onrush of music that crept out over the escarpments of the amphitheater, thin groping notes like the claws of wintry trees made of black sound. Colored lights, auroral, pulsed against the clouds in time to the music, reminding him of something older than memories of childhood Hell-dreams. He imagined his grandfather's evangelical words driving down at him like a pelting brimstone hail, and thought how the old man would see the theater as a concession erected around the mouth of Hell, into which the damned were lured with music and screams which passage through the gates had transfigured into wild, seductive laughter. He pulled up his collar against the storm of invisible coals, and wished he could have stayed in the bus. But it had broken down completely, the prognosis was terrible, and he needed help.

He glanced back at the old bus, cold now in the mountain moonlight and the distant moth-battered glare of the stadium lights, far out at a corner of the

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lot among a dozen other buses not quite as full of memories, though equally lurid: paisleys, spirals, fractal swirls in luminous paints. An anachronism, a retrograde voyager, an affront to the new serious spirit of reform. *Do drugs!* —it seemed to tell all the little children who followed its progress on the back roads, delighting in its psychedelic colors. *Run from home and join the circus!* Following the Group was the same thing.

Turning back toward the gates, he saw another bus pulling in before the amphitheater, brakes squealing and then a gasping hiss of air as it stopped almost directly in his path. Gleaming black, with a long row of square windows all seemingly cut from warm yellow parchment. Its black surface was weirdly textured in diamond-shapes, oblique facets that turned light back on itself: like a stealth-bus, invisible to enemy detection. He walked around it cautiously, watching it over his shoulder, expecting the front door to open — anxious, in fact, to see the driver sitting up in the high seat at the top of the steps.

"Tickets," said a voice, and he whirled to find himself in the shadow of the gate. A flashlight caught and held his hands in glare, making the hairs stand out like abrupt shards of spun glass, the blemishes suddenly malign. He jerked his hands out of the light and plunged them into his pocket as if to spare them such scrutiny, but actually searching for the plastic pass that had been his for longer than he could remember.

The torch, its bearer still unseen, waved him in, opening a path into the cement tunnel strewn with torn tickets, broken bottles, pools of piss with cigarette butts disintegrating in them. He hurried, but the beam deserted him. Laughter, and then a low growling that might have been nothing worse than some enormous old man clearing his throat. He walked around the sound of breathing, kicked a crushed can skittering, walked into a solid wall of stench and sound. He didn't need to see the Group. Their music was everywhere. He brushed cobwebs from his face and stepped out into the amphitheater.

Bodies like an ocean, like a breaking wave of souls caught in mid-curl, rushed away beneath him to fill the vast pool of the theater, curving up and around, reaching to the sky on all sides, energized by the pulsing light. All of them dancing, swaying, caught in the trance of the music. From down here the clouds looked like a vaporous cover thrown over the theater. Looking up made him dizzy, his vision lined with a funnel of possessed faces staring down

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at him — past him, really, toward the stage. He shuddered and followed their eyes with his own, knowing that was where he could always find his charges.

The Group was so much smaller than its music. Tiny figures, although of jewel-like clarity even in the smoky distances of the theater, they bent above their instruments, hardly moving anything but arms and fingers. He had seen them often enough to know their eyes were closed, their mouths fixed in grave and urgent expressions. So they would remain until some shrieking inspiration bore its way through them, when their heads went back and their eyes bulged and words spirited from their throats in desperate harmonies. — But that was always later. This early on, the concert was a voyage in its infancy, almost plodding still. It was perhaps the only time he would be able to find his riders. Earlier, the place would have been a riot of people vying for position; later it would be a frenzy. Things were relatively subdued.

He found a stairway leading down into the sunken center of the arena; it was covered in bodies, worshipers who hardly acknowledged his presence, barely allowed him to pass. They resented his worming passage, thinking that he sought to put himself closer to the source of the music. If they had known how little he wished this, they would have laughed in disbelief. Often he was forced to halt and wait for a new path to open; and then he would feel himself trapped with the music, suffocating in it. People all around him, eyes rolled back, heads whipping from side to side, and himself deaf to it. Afraid they might recognize that he was not one of them.

Finally he pulled himself free of strangers, seeing faces he recognized just ahead, mere yards from the elevated heights of the stage. They were together there, packed close as if for protection, the eternal pilgrims. No doubt there were other such clusters scattered through the theater, but these were his own. Driver had grown fond of them, if not their music. The object of their devotions — the Group — meant nothing more to him than a steady job, travel, food, companionship. He could as easily have been driving a limousine or a schoolbus, or delivering parcels door to door — in which case, he would never have experienced the strangeness of such nights. The awareness of how close he had come to missing this particular life lessened his dread of the crowd. He felt almost at home here, through familiarity.

As he pushed his way toward Sonora — her blond hair streaming back, metal rivets threaded through the strands, long strips of gleaming tattooed

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scalp showing above the wildly colored scarves she wore — a fearful face thrust toward him. A skinny young man, bearded and pale, his hair torn into tatters, his eyes wide with horror. Screaming not with the music, which might have been appropriate later in the night, but in time to some sinister rhythm of his own making.

He collided with Driver, who would have fallen if not for the congestion of bodies holding him upright. "It's happening again!" he howled, staring desperately into Driver's eyes. "I can't stop it — make it stop! I always forget!"

Driver flinched away from the apparition, anxious to avoid contact. The kid reached toward him, then drew back himself, his eyes already wandering. "No," he muttered, and Driver knew he was in the depths of some drug-inspired nightmare. There were people in these crowds whose minds had cracked and would never heal. People who appeared only in this context, screaming prophesy, gripped by visions, having no relation to the outside world, the world of day. This one sank to his knees, forcing the heels of his hands up into his eye sockets, wrenching them violently as if pushing something in or jarring something loose. "No, this is the first time," he said. Then he staggered upright again and stumbled on, chewed up in the mill of flesh. To Driver he was vaguely familiar; he had probably glimpsed him rushing through the crowds on his stoned jeremiad on other nights, during other shows.

By now Sonora had noticed Driver, and she pointed him out to the others, who drew him into their midst in a sheltered spot they had made of their bodies, a haven woven of flesh and bone. It was difficult to hear them in the din, for the music was building now, cresting toward some peak he did not wish to witness. But they made him welcome with looks and gestures and squeezes on his arms and shoulders. No doubt they thought he was becoming one of them, that the music had finally done its trick and lured him in. In a spirit of companionship, Sonora put her mouth to his ear and said, "Try this."

She opened her palm under his eyes, and in it was a little foil pack. She opened that, and in among the silver creases he saw a thing like a stylized teardrop the color of blood, a three-dimensional paisley, gelatinous, specks of light sculling through it. She lifted it by the curled tail, like a tadpole, and laid it on his palm. He could sense what was in it, and instantly panicked, gripping the droplet as if to crush it.

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"We all did it," she reassured him. "It's just coming on, we won't be too far ahead of you."

"No," he said. And then, because it didn't register, he screamed it.

She drew back slightly to show her amusement. "It's not what you think," she shouted. "This is new."

He shook his head firmly. "The bus is dead. We need a decent mechanic — we need parts, and a ride to find them. We need help. Help!"

While he was shouting, Sonora peeled back the fingers of his hand one by one; he ignored her silly game until he had finished shouting, and then, because she was staring at his palm, he too looked down and saw the small reddish stain where the teardrop had been. Even as he looked, it squirmed away into his skin, drunk in as if the flesh were dry earth touched by rain.

At the sight, he began to forget his errand. He forgot where he was, who he was. "Why" became the real concern, but when he asked it of Sonora and the others — Chad and Parky, Selene and Yvette and Dietch — they stilled him with their hands and buffeted him into the dance, until he no longer questioned anything. He gave up his will, if he had ever had it.

It was merciful, for a time, to escape his dread and innate skepticism, his constant sense of something going wrong. But his anxiety did not end, exactly — only changed, uncurling like the tail-end of that paisley, and left him weaving through the gates again, this time one of a hushed line, holding hands in long chains like human molecules, everyone deserting the theater silently, the entire crowd speaking in whispers or not at all. Something vast slept behind them, and they departed quietly so as not to wake it.

The matter of the bus had already been discussed, he discovered, as with gestures Sonora indicated they were to board not their own defunct vehicle but the black bus that had pulled up by the amphitheater gate. Apparently there was room for them in it, and he went along, though he would not be the driver of this bus. And that was something of a relief, too. It had been so long since he'd been able to sit back and simply watch the changing roadside. He had always felt so responsible for everything....

Inside was pleasant contrast to the inky, angular black exterior. Here it was all warmth and glow, soft pillows and cushions spread everywhere, low bunks overhead for sleeping, plenty of blankets for the cold nights of traveling. He slipped off his shoes and went on hands and knees onto the padded platform, crawling toward the back of the bus, the warm rumbling

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cave above the engine. In his own delapidated vehicle, the engine had growled under the hood, always up in front of him. It was less efficient, but he missed it for a moment. Curled against a pillow, eyes shut, he dreamed a clear picture of the other bus as it had been, new and freshly painted, when he'd first hired on as its driver. Years ago, and thousands of miles behind him, that had been. He realized — had known all along, tonight, without admitting it till now — that it would never be fixed. The old bus was dead.

Now the passengers of the black bus, those who had invited them aboard some unknown time during the show (as if their plight had communicated itself osmotically), pulled down black shades, as though no spark of light could be permitted out. Sonora and Chad joined in the effort, but Driver was content not to move.

I wonder, he thought, since I'm apparently not the driver of this bus, I wonder if I get to keep my name.

THEY WERE all passengers now, Sonora thought, watching Driver, halfway convinced (but never quite) that she was sharing his thoughts. His fear was obvious enough, betrayed by his stiff posture, as he lay among the cushions like a wooden martyr marionette dropped down from a cross to which it was still attached by strings. His mind barked out loud warnings; he felt threatened, but it was easing.

She smiled and put her hand on his breast. "It's strange for you, not driving, isn't it?"

"We're not moving yet," he said with a wry smile, as if he had seen into her intentions.

"Yes we are," said Sonora.

Sonora could still remember her name, which was more than she could say of the others on the bus. She wasn't sure about all of them; and they didn't seem exactly sure of themselves. Chad she remembered; Yvette, yes — and the one who called himself Neuron. Or did she know Neuron? Hadn't for long, actually. He'd come up to them during the concert, right after Driver had said he needed help.

"Join us on the bus out front," he'd whispered in her ear. "We'll take you wherever you want to go."

He wore a cowboy hat, which, for a guy who called himself Neuron, was

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an odd thing. But the crown of the hat was transparent, clipped away and replaced with a transparent dome which crisply replicated the crease down the center of a Stetson. And down in that dome you could see lights moving and pulsing inside a plastic model of a human brain. At least she hoped it was plastic.

"It's not plastic, you know," he'd said right away, as if she'd asked audibly. "It's laminated so you can look right in. Just as tough as my old skull."

"You go around like that?" she said.

"Sometimes I wear a regular hat, like when I'm working in bright lights. But on nights like this I like to keep the top down and...*'just let the lights shine*!'"

The last of his words were a line from a song the Group was singing right at that exact same instant.

"So how do I know which bus is yours?" she leaned and asked him.

"Can't miss it. She's black and weirdly angled, as you'd say."

"*I'd* say? You said it."

Now he was putting himself down beside her, his cowboy hat tossed off, and wrapping a black bandanna kerchief around his head. The neural lights had dimmed anyway. She vaguely remembered seeing his brain bobbing along way up ahead in the dark tunnel as they were seeping out of the amphitheater, the last chords of music hanging behind them like a bubble about to burst. She had followed him dreaming of nightlights. "I don't suppose you have any wisdom pills, do you?" he asked.

She pulled a vaporizer out of her pocket. "Will this do?"

"Hafta."

When he could speak again, he did so raspingly. "Who's your friend there? The comfortable one."

"That's Driver," Sonora said. She couldn't tell if he was asleep or just pretending. The motion of the bus lulled him. She realized it was probably the first time he had ever allowed himself to sleep on a moving bus. My God, she thought. The most basic pleasure of the journey and he's never experienced it until now; no wonder he seemed so uncomfortable all the time.

Driver opened his eyes and looked at them.

"What kind of bus is this?" he said.

"You'll be sorry you asked that question," Neuron said.

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Sonora had ominous intimations of an unspeakable horror about to be revealed. No sooner had Neuron spoken his warning than an old man near the front of the bus began to talk, twisting his leathery neck around so the cords twined together.

"This is the only kind of bus there is," the old man said.

"That there's Crouch," said Neuron. "And you just started him on his favorite subject."

"It's not my favorite — not by a long shot," Crouch said, knee-walking toward them. "But it's one on which I have many opinions."

"That's what I meant," Neuron said.

"They're not the same thing, what you said and what you meant."

"Crouch, you make my brain tired."

"And it makes my soul weary looking at you, Cerebrus."

"What was that again?" Sonora asked, looking on amazed at this stream of bickering, which suggested old well-worn ruts in the relationship between these men, so that she doubted they could ever talk to one another in any other way — had they even wanted to.

"Cerebrus. The Spectacular Transparent Head. The Mind-Body split made manifest."

"I have many opinions about buses, too," Driver said. "I've thought about them a lot, while I was driving. But this isn't like riding on any bus I can imagine. This is like moving on waves, just soft little swells over the sea...or a big lake."

"Or a river," said the old man. "A river's more like it."

Then "Look!" said Yvette at one of the windows, peering out through a tiny spyslot she'd lifted beneath the shades. "It's our bus!"

Sonora turned around and made herself one of the eyeholes. They were coming down from the mountains, narrow curving roads winding around and switching back, wriggling down the slopes. They were out of the cool dark trees, the pines and rivers and rocks. This was the arid desolate place above the foothills, the place where nothing grew but weeds and aluminum guardrails. She had always hated this part of the road — of any mountain road. This was where the dust beat itself senseless, blowing in from the plains; or where the salt fell, whisked in off the sea. Nothing moved here but headlights.

On the switchback below — moving past, under them, and then in the

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opposite direction — she finally saw their bus. Unmistakable. And there were people in it.

"Hey," she said. "Driver, I thought you said the bus was broken."

His face darkened in a scowl. "I know that bus," he said. "And it died tonight."

"Maybe it hasn't, yet."

Sonora looked over at Neuron, but only briefly. His smile, like his words, puzzled her. She went back to watching the bus below. Headlights vanished around a curve, came out again, continued to weave. The air was full of dust or smoke, so she could see the beams swinging back and forth.

Driver pushed up next to her. "What are you looking at?"

"Just what Yvette said. It looks like —"

"It *can't* be our bus."

"That's what it looks like, I'm sorry."

"It can't be *our* bus."

He looked anyway.

Someone up front switched on a radio and music came out of the scattered speakers. It was the Group, predictably, broadcast from the microsatellite they owned, which all the pilgrim buses picked up with a special antenna. Sonora hardly heard it, it had been background music for so long. But she noticed when the broadcast cut off suddenly.

Suddenly was hardly the word for it.

The tune died with a scream, then a hysterical wailing and clamoring. Voices in panic and terror. "No!" someone shouted. "No, my God!"

"No — no!"

Screams. Then a clearer voice, only slightly stronger than the others, high and nasal, a man: "This is a report — hello, are you there? Anyone? I'm reporting live from the airfield where the Group was just now departing. It's hard to be sure, but we just saw — everyone waiting out here is afraid of it —"

For a moment the sane voice was drowned out by shrieking that completely overwhelmed everything else. He moved away or somehow regained control — at least of himself, at least for the moment. "Oh my god, yes, it's apparently true. We saw a fireball — well, heard a horrible sound, first, hard to describe — impossible to describe, I'd have to say — sort of a metal scraping and then a crumpling crash — and then that fireball, an

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explosion that is now pouring up into the sky.

"Brothers and sisters, I do not want to be the one to tell you this, but I saw them with my own eyes and I have the microphone now, so my voice is going to have to be the one to say it. I saw them board that plane a few minutes before it took off. I would like to tell you that they were not on it, but I saw all of them go in, and then the door closed and the ladder pulled away and the plane started to taxi off down the runway into the darkness, so I could only see its running lights moving across the field. It was very dark out there, everyone. I don't know if another plane came in out of nowhere or if the Group's plane just didn't get off the ground in time...or if something else went wrong. But I can see a giant wing or a tail sticking up out of the flames; that's all I can see through the smoke. That's all I can tell you now, my friends...my poor friends. My God...I'm so sorry for all of us."

Silence in the black bus, indecipherable. Sonora knew that she and Yvette and Chad and Driver were all looking out their windows at their own bus on the road below, but somehow none of this seemed real. What they were hearing, what they were seeing — none of it.

Their crazy, colorful bus's headlights drove in and around, wove sharply once, twice, and again. In an instant — it happened that fast — Sonora saw the bus speed up and go out of control. The turn ahead was sharp and lit too late, and whoever drove was not thinking of the road.

"You idiot!" Driver said, yelling down at the bus as if he could save it with a word.

But he couldn't. None of them could have done anything to stop it going over the edge. The disaster had begun when the Group got onto the plane; now it was only spreading, a shockwave, carrying all of them with it.

"Shut those shades now," Crouch said firmly.

"But — but —"

"I said shut those shades!" the old man insisted.

"Come on." Neuron was up next to her now, gently taking the shade out of her fingers, sealing it down again. "Crouch knows."

"What's happening here?" Driver yelled at them.

It had to be asked, eventually. Sonora was not so sure it would ever be answered.

The speakers shut off and the lights dimmed drastically. Only a few little bulbs remained to show a way through the heaped pillows. For the first time

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Sonora noticed figures sleeping, wrapped in sheets, on the overhead bunks which lined the interior. There was not much room up there, under the curved ceiling; they were crammed in like luggage, and among luggage. The bus whirred on, and it was as Driver had said: it felt as though they were rocking, but not so gently now. Crazily. With growing violence. She lay down flat on her back, afraid she might be thrown or at least rolled; with arms spread wide, she grabbed onto the mattress, convinced that they too were now going off the road.

A wave of sound roared through the bus, beginning in the pings and creaks and groans and rattles of the engine, the shocks, the brakes and the tires — growing louder and louder, until it sounded like jabbering voices. It built into a storm of howls and crashing, as if they'd been caught in an avalanche of souls on the steep road. The sides of the bus felt too thin to protect them. Hail or hammerblows struck the ceilings, the walls, even pummeled them from underneath. She felt a repetitive, dull slamming just under one of her shoulders, a steady beat that seemed to be aiming up deliberately at her, driving toward her heart.

Her mind had room for nothing else. The lights flickered and went out, and she would have screamed except that Neuron was right up next to her, whispering comfort in her ear, and she could see his brain glowing faintly, comfortingly, through his bandanna. She grabbed onto him, wondering for a moment how Driver was taking this — sorry that he had always been so aloof from them. She supposed he would be all right.

Then, some long time before she accepted the fact, the sounds died out and the hammering stopped and even the sickening motion was done. They seemed to be at rest, the motor purring — idling — underneath them; and all around them, otherwise, perfect silence.

A few lights came on again. Neuron sat up and pulled his hat from a hook between the windows, settled it over his head. He looked down at her. "You might want to wait here."

"For what?" she asked, words that barely escaped her dry throat.

But he was moving on his knees toward the front of the bus, along with some of the others, including old Crouch, who was coughing with a wet, bubbling sound as if the shaking had jarred something loose in his chest. The others from their old bus were sitting against the walls, the masked windows, some curled into fetal positions among the pillows, eyes squeezed shut.

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Yvette sat with her arms wrapped around her knees, watching Crouch.

Sonora looked over at Driver. His eyes were open but he was staring at the ceiling, looking contemplative, resigned. When he saw her looking, he smiled briefly, a darting flicker.

"Are you okay?" she said.

"I don't suppose so," he said. "On the other hand, does it matter?"

Crouch whistled sharply, and she turned to look down the aisle at him. But he wasn't calling her, or any of them. He was looking up at the sleeping racks. One of them, up there, was stirring.

Just then, there was a loud pneumatic wheeze. A rush of warm air tore at her scarves, as if the bus had gasped out its last breath. A bitter metallic cold replaced the warmth she hadn't noticed until it was gone. The driver — whose face she had not seen, who was no more than a scarcely registered shape in her memory — stepped from his seat and descended the steps at the front of the bus. Everyone watched him depart through the accordioned doors, his shoulders sharp in a dark, stiffly pressed uniform, disappearing outside. When he was gone, Crouch moved irritably toward the sleeper in the closest bunk.

"Come on," he snapped, shoving the figure there. "It's your time."

There was a crackling sound, something like a canvas sail being unfurled in the confined space, and a creaking groan. What Sonora had thought were sheets slowly unfolded into wings. Pale leathery wings, bald as a rat's tail, with clawed hinges. The sleeper, at Crouch's prodding, rolled from the bunk and dropped to the floor, moving awkwardly on thin legs, its long nails catching and tearing in the mattress covers. She had only a glimpse of its face — but that was enough. Sleepy slitted eyes, long white snout, thin fanged mouth. Then Crouch was harrying it ahead of him through the aisle, down the steps and out the door. Only when it was gone could Sonora look away, and then her eyes went immediately to the others still slumbering overhead. They did not all appear to be of the same sort; but there were more like that one up there.

Suddenly the black bus seemed less of a haven than she had imagined. She went on her knees after Neuron, who was sitting at the edge of the platform pulling on tall boots. Her own sandals were below in a pile of shoes.

"Be sure you get the right ones," he said as she rooted for her pair. "This isn't the place to go walking off in someone else's shoes."

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"You and your identity," Crouch called back sourly from the doorway. Then he stepped off into the night, and Sonora distinctly heard his footsteps crunching down hard into gravel or sand. The sound reassured her. At least they were somewhere.

There was a pile of loose shawls and blankets near the shoes. She dragged a poncho with a mandala pattern over her head and went down the aisle, down the steps, looking over once at the driver's seat and the dashboard as she went. She didn't drive, herself; but it looked like any other bus.

Stepping out, she learned instantly where the heat had gone. Sucked up, sunk into the reddish sand, which instantly snatched the last trace of warmth from her body. She stood hugging the blanket around her, cold as alabaster yet not quite feeling the chill. That numb.

Footprints led away from the bus, toward the horizon. At the end of that lengthening trail was the dark uniform of the driver, plodding steadily along. But Crouch, who stood outside, and Neuron, who now jumped down beside her and stamped his feet as if to force nonexistent heat into them, were not looking that way. They gazed straight out ahead of the bus, in the direction it was headed. Neuron pushed back his cowboy hat for a better view of the winged silhouette that was lofting higher by the second against a dark sky with faint stars in it. It was the violet hour, wolf-glow, but lacking qualities she associated with dawn or dusk. Then she realized what it was. At the zenith was a molten orange glow, like a sun without definition; while spreading away from that in rippled waves was steadily deeper darkness, purpling till it coalesced into perfect blackness against the land. It was the exact opposite of sunrise or sunset; here, darkness massed at the horizon, and light retreated toward the center of the sky. Stars burned and flickered close to the ground, like the lights of a desert city. The flying shape, as it gained distance, gradually merged with the darkness that ringed them entirely. Behind them, she noticed, was no sign of the mountains they had traversed; nor of any river, for that matter.

Sonora was grateful to have at least the thick blob of molten light above, though it cast no warmth that she could feel. Even as she thought this, she saw that it was dwindling — that the darkness was not a static thing, a mere wall around them, but continued to grow and seep up across the sky. Blue and violet invaded the orange flare, weakening it while she watched. It was like a foreign cell under attack, dissolving. Stars marked

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the territory taken by night.

Well, she thought. At least there are stars. For the moment. I won't take them for granted.

As the orange light faded, Crouch and Neuron grew visibly nervous. They peered hard at the horizon, squinting into the dark, until the old man began to curse.

"I can't believe it," he said. "Another one."

"Maybe he'll be back," Neuron said. "Anyway, there's more."

"Not many!"

This, too, had the feel of an old — an endless — argument.

"Okay," Neuron said, turning toward Sonora. "That's about it for us, now. You better get back up inside there."

"What about the driver?" Sonora said, for at the end of that long trail of footprints there was nothing now but more darkness.

"Looks like that's taken care of," he said, nodding up the stairwell. Driver himself had taken the seat, settling in with an eager look as he examined the dashboard, tested the steering wheel, and finally tried the lever that worked the door. It sighed shut casually, squeezing the inner light to a narrow slit between its rubber flaps — until even that went out.

"Hey!" Neuron shouted.

"Shit!" Crouch yelled. "Don't move!"

The black bus was gone. There was nothing now but darkness sweeping in over the empty plain of sand, with the three of them standing there alone while wind erased the tire tracks.

Sonora spun to look around, to see where it had gone; but Neuron grabbed onto her, harder than she had ever been grabbed. "Don't...move!" he cried. She could hardly see his face, it was so much darker now. A membrane seemed to have been pulled even across the stars. There was only a tiny sullen dot of orange being extinguished in the vault overhead. Once it snuffed out, there would be nothing left to see by.

Everything was quickening. Night came on like the wind, which roared out of nowhere as if bent on tearing them from their place. She planted her feet in the sand and knelt, dragging Neuron down beside her. Voices buzzed in the sand, which scoured her flesh, tore at her eyelids. She screamed and the sand rushed into her mouth, caking her tongue, drinking every ounce of moisture — stealing it from her, sucking the life away. Neuron and Crouch

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had her by either arm, holding her between them, and they were doing something she couldn't quite see. Waving their arms, pounding the air with a hollow sound.

Suddenly something blocked the wind. As if a wall had been erected behind them and they stood now in a quiet, sheltered spot. Sonora brushed sand from her eyes, tried to look behind her, but something else caught her stinging gaze. The light again, a thin slice of yellow, opened up before them. The steps of the bus were revealed.

"Go!" Neuron yelled, and shoved her in. She stumbled on the steps, clinging to his arm, pulling him with her. Crouch, his face scraped raw and caked with bloody sand, swept the air with open hands, feeling for the door but missing it. Beyond him, something enormous moved toward them at inconceivable speed — like a part of the landscape curling and reaching for the bus. Sonora screamed and grabbed for his hand, and Neuron turned and saw it too, and also grabbed. They caught him by one wrist, but their screams — or the view — had startled Driver, and he closed the door with only that one hand yet inside the bus.

"Wait!" she said. "Open it — open!"

Driver was slow, as if stunned by what he had seen through the door. She couldn't grab the lever herself, not without letting go of Crouch — and that wouldn't have been wise. As hard as she and Neuron pulled, she could feel the old man's arm slipping out of their grasp.

"Driver!" she screamed.

"Go!" Neuron yelled.

"The door!" Sonora cried.

"Just go!"

Driver stamped on the gas and the engine roared. His face was white, stricken. He started to haul on the stick shift, and Sonora could hear gears grinding, could feel the wheels catching in something, jerking them forward.

Yvette rushed up then, grabbed the lever and hauled it back. The door wheezed open again. At first all she could see was Crouch's hand and forearm. It seemed to end in midair, just below the elbow; but that couldn't be true. Driver threw the shift the rest of the way into gear. With a liberated growl that quickly became a whining purr, the black bus lurched forward, throwing its passengers back. Crouch flew into the stairwell and the door clapped shut, rubber flaps somehow sealing out the night.

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Neuron moved quickly, gathering the old man up in a limp heap from the stairs, carrying him back to the padded platform where he laid him down gingerly. Sonora peered over his shoulder, expecting to see Crouch in rags, shredded and bloody, worse than he had been a moment before.

But he lay breathing quietly, sand covering his clothes, lining the wrinkles of his face, otherwise apparently untouched. He opened his eyes and breathed up at Neuron:

"Got me."

"No, old man," Neuron said. "You're fine. You're gonna be okay this time."

Crouch shook his head. "I was out there — for ages. I just barely remember you...."

Driver, at the wheel, still accelerating — though Sonora couldn't imagine into what, with the windshield showing nothing ahead of them — twisted around to say, "What happened? I only shut the doors for a second — a fraction of a second."

"To you it was a fraction of a second," Neuron said, then turned back quickly to Crouch. "But you remember now, don't you? You're here again."

"I'm changed, though — changing. I want...I need to lie down."

"You are lying down."

"No, I mean — up there."

Neuron glanced at the overhead racks. Sonora thought she saw his lips move in prayer. Then he put a hand on Crouch's breast.

"No, old man, you're not — "

"Damn it, I know what I need. Help me up. I wasn't asking, I was telling you."

A few of the passengers moved to his aid, but Neuron was not one of them. Sonora put her arms around him; as much for her own comfort as for his. Crouch hobbled a few feet down the center aisle to the newly empty bunk, and allowed himself to be boosted up into the rack. They put a pillow under his gray head, swept the sand out from under him. Then he closed his eyes and turned his face away. In moments he was as quiet as the rest of the sleepers up there.

Neuron sank down onto the mattress. "I can't believe it," he said. "This is bad. I thought Crouch was — if anyone, Crouch was here for the long haul."

Sonora kept her arms around him. She glanced up at the front of the bus,

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saw Driver's face in the black glass of the windshield. What did he see out there, she wondered. How did he keep control?

DRIVER STARED down into the headlights, which scarcely showed anything except flat sand unrolling ahead of him, just enough to drive straight into. He drove by instinct, or by trust, suspecting that there were no obstacles in their path — would be none for quite some distance. Thinking, grimly, that even if he ran into a wall — so what?

It was something, he reflected, to be up here again, in the driver's seat, doing the only thing he had ever done for as long as he could recall. He felt relief at being essentially alone. Too many passengers back there — from the old bus and from this new one — brought on that unfocused, troubling pressure he always felt in crowds, as if he were in danger of coming apart or losing himself in their midst. They would know him as Driver now, and he wouldn't have to know much about them. They would be grateful to leave the driving to him.

It was a challenge. He had never seen a road like this, or imagined one existed. Well...maybe he had. On certain nights after days of driving, after weeks of journeying on the endless pilgrimage, following the Group, he would sometimes lie in bed in some motel, or in a sleeping bag on the ground outside the bus, and imagine that he was still driving — but in perfect darkness, with his eyes closed. He would dream the act of driving distilled to its essence — no real road beneath the tires, only the voyage itself, always leading into sleep.

Sleep, he supposed, if you could stay conscious through it, might be like this. Lucid dreaming, that's what this was. Or dreaming wakefulness. A drugged kind of —

Squirming memories surfaced; the palm of his hand tingled. Something about a drug, a droplet, a burrowing thing.

He was on the verge of remembering when a white shape flew into the headlights and slammed against the windshield. He hit the brakes, screaming into the face of the thing that had crumpled against the glass — crushed snout, red slit eyes, torn wings as wide as the windshield. When the bus finally ground to a stop, the flattened thing slid backward and fell into the dust.

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Sonora and Neuron stood next to him, peering down. In the headlights it was fairly well-lit, and apparently dead. Its wings unfolded the rest of the way, its claws twitched galvanically then stilled. From one of the withered wing-fingers, a bit of colored ribbon dangled, talon-pierced. It was a rainbow paisley pattern, part of a scarf or a pennant. Driver had seen the colors before, flapping over the stage at a concert.

"Damn," Neuron said. "I guess we are headed the right way."

"You're not going out there again," Sonora said.

"No. You can keep on going, Driver-man."

Driver sank back into his seat. The engine had stalled, but it started up easily enough. He pulled forward slowly, watching the ruined thing pass under the front bumper. He was careful to drive as straight as possible, but even so, he thought he heard the wide wings crackle as the tires passed over them.

Neuron clapped him hard on the shoulder. "It's a good sign," he said, nodding. "A real good sign."

Not long after that, the stars reappeared. Dead ahead, clustered low on the horizon, spreading slowly apart as the bus sped forward.

He was squinting for a better look when he saw something moving. He wasn't ready for a repeat of the last collision. He started to brake, hoping to avoid a mess; but then he saw the pale thing waving. A person.

"What's going on?"

Without answering, he brought the bus to a stop. The person outside — a skinny, ratty-looking kid — came running toward them down the bright twin tunnel of headlights, waving his arms desperately. When he reached the bus he started banging on the door.

Driver looked back at Neuron, as if for permission. "Go ahead," the cowboy said, and Driver opened the doors.

The kid hurled himself up the stairs, breathless and laughing. "I can't believe it!" he was saying. "You — you found me out here. I mean, there's others here? Wow! I thought I could hear them up ahead, you know, I been following just the little sounds in the dark, just those few notes you can barely hear. But I should have known I wasn't the only one. I couldn't be the only one. I mean, of the followers who'd do this, who'd come here."

His eyes were everywhere all at once, pupils enormous, as if he'd been staring into darkness forever. Finally his gaze settled on Driver, and his wide

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smile froze inside his pale ragged beard.

"I remember you," he said. "I met you! And you're really here now. Man!"

Driver started to look away, leaving him to the others. The kid was crazy or high. Then, abruptly, he remembered their meeting in the amphitheater earlier; the kid had come rushing up to him just like this, exactly as crazed, and then staggered off.

"Man, this is great," he was saying. "We'll catch up with them now, yeah. You got a bus and everything. How'd you manage that? I mean, on foot it's tough. I didn't have much to go by. But — but maybe it's what you have when you go, right? I mean, were you all in a bus? All of you?"

He looked around the interior of the black bus, but no one answered. The other passengers seemed almost embarrassed by his manic energy.

"I mean, all I had was my own two feet, right? Only way I could think to follow was to, you know...walk. I found an edge, like, a real high place, top of a building. A real tall building. It was so tall the lights on the ground looked like tiny faraway stars, you know? Like stars, yeah. And I just went walking toward them, right out into the sky, stars above and below, stars everywhere...and I walked through that for a while, till the stars went away and it got dark. But I could hear the Group again, finally. Like they were up ahead just a little ways — they didn't have much of a head start on me. That was such a relief, right? I mean — I was trying to imagine the world without them. What's left? Hey...you got a radio, why aren't you tuned in? You gotta tune 'em in. How else you gonna follow?"

The kid went to the dashboard and punched on the radio. It hadn't been on since they'd seen their old colorful bus plunge into darkness. It crackled to life now, as if the satellite were still out there orbiting in the dark, bouncing signals to anyone who cared to receive them....

Music.

Driver straightened when he recognized it. The Group was coming in clear, as if they were outside the bus, surrounding it.

"Yeah," the kid said, ecstatic. He sank down on the steps.

Some of the others began to whisper, in the back of the bus. Yvette and Chad sounded excited. They knew all the tapes, all the recordings going around, being traded; they knew not only all the songs, but all the individual concerts, had heard most of them in person. But this was something new.

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This was...

"It's happening right now," Chad was saying. "Can't you feel it?"

And Yvette: "It's live!"

"Yeah!" the kid on the steps agreed. "That's them! We're catching up! What're we doing sitting here, Driver? Let's get moving!"

Driver had already been in the act of pushing the great bus forward. He bent once again to the task of driving, while music filled the black bus and the stars spread out on the horizon, drifting higher now. Not stars at all, he saw, but fires. Scattered fires burning all over the slopes of some dark shape. He sensed that something held them up, but could gain no impression of it. Spires, or simply a wall? The sky was too black to allow a silhouette, and the fires lit nothing but themselves.

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The excitement in the bus grew as they approached the lights. The music was getting louder, the signal stronger. It was strange to know that the Group was up ahead playing — but to what audience?

And then, from the passengers, came a cry of disappointment and frustration — even of despair. For the tunes had blurred into a final lullabye...the Group's signature piece, after which they always left in utter silence.

"Hurry!" they were yelling at him, as if he could squeeze any more speed from the bus — as if they didn't mind crashing headlong into whatever black enormity held the specks of flame aloft. He couldn't bring himself to drive blindly, though. The closer he got to the lights, the slower he went — he had no sense of depth here. How far had he come? How far had he to go?

The tune crested, tumbled over an inevitable edge into silence.

"Noooooo," they wailed inside the black bus.

At that moment, the bus passed through a gate, an entrance or exit of some sort, into a tunnel. It was luminous with a deep violet light. They were descending, so he took his foot off the accelerator for an instant — and just then, they burst out abruptly into a huge arena, a stadium or coliseum whose dimensions were almost inconceivable.

They had emerged somewhere in the middle of the field. Ramparts or bleachers rose on all sides; they were like distant mountains, their true size impossible to judge. He had no sense of scale.

The ground was littered with rubbish: chunks and splinters of whitish rock that looked like the shards a mason leaves behind when he chisels a tombstone. Gnawed, discarded bones; soiled take-out containers. Worms and flies crawled and buzzed through the heaps of filth. Glass crunched and burst under the tires. Wide piles of embers smoked and glowed here and there like the remains of bonfires. He drove carefully through the waste, not wanting to be stranded here. Static poured from the speakers; all directions looked equally undesirable, all destinations futile. To head for any one of the surrounding walls would have been equally vain; they were all impassable.

"We missed 'em," the kid on the steps said, dejected. "We just missed them." He put his head on his knees and began to sob. "All that...and...and..."

Sonora moved over to him. Her eyes were on the desolate scene beyond the window, but she put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Hey, don't worry. We'll catch them next time, okay? They're still out

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there."

"But where?"

Sonora fiddled with the radio dial, but all bands seemed equally dead now.

"We'll figure it out," she said.

"Not here, though," said Neuron.

"What do you mean?" Sonora turned to look at him. Driver kept the bus moving slowly, weaving around heaps of smoldering coals, because that was what he knew how to do.

"We have to keep moving. We have to get out now. If we get stranded, stuck here, they'll pull so far ahead we'll never catch up."

"How...how do you know all this?" she asked.

"We've been following them a lot longer than you," he said. "You learn these things."

"But — but all this, it only happened tonight — I mean, if this is still tonight."

Neuron shook his head. "You don't see. It didn't happen tonight, whatever that means. And it hasn't happened yet, neither. It happened a long time ago — and it's still happening, even now. It keeps deepening; it keeps moving through all the levels, and that's where some of us come from...from the world before, or another one before that. Just like you, now, hooking up with us. It'll change you eventually, like it changed me." He put a finger to his skull. "You'll become what you are, along the way; but what you are will change."

Sonora stared at him, irritated. "Just tell us what to do," she said.

"If I knew that..." Neuron started.

"Let me," came a rasping voice from above them. In the rear-view mirror, Driver could see someone stepping down from the bunks. It was Crouch, the old man. He hadn't been there long, but apparently it was long enough. He almost wasn't Crouch anymore.

He knelt before them, extended his pale, long-fingered hand, and slowly opened his fingers. Driver gasped. From the popping blue veins in the old man's palm, red slugs were crawling. They wriggled up, dried, curled to a wisp at one end, a rounded blob at the other. "Corpsules," Crouch said. "I can make my own now."

It was the first thing Driver had seen here that truly frightened him.

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Then he remembered when he had seen them before.

When and *where*....

The amphitheater. Like this place, only smaller, enclosed, packed with people. Could this be the same place, much later that same night, with all the people gone from it? Had they been driving in a circle all night, and now everyone was home and sleeping except them? But it was so immense...had they shrunk somehow?

"Disgusting," Chad said, his face pressed to a window. "Look at all them fukkin diapers, my god. And the cans, the garbage bags." Which there were, bursting at the seams, stuffed with rancid meaty stuff, ground worms maybe, that wouldn't quite ever decay, it was so rubbery and plastic.

"Yea, verily," said Crouch now, raising two fingers in a peace sign, then making a sign of power over the handful of red drops. "Behold me, that am yer angel."

And then his wings unfolded.

It wasn't a good idea, there in the bus. He battered them against the racks and jumped back, hunching smaller. "Jesus!"

"Looks like this isn't your day, old man," Neuron said, putting arms around him, helping him pack the wings back in again. In almost the same gesture, he swiped the handful of drops from the white-furred palm. Apparently it was expected. Crouch sucked in his cheeks and, still stooping, hobbled painfully toward the front of the bus.

"Open the doors," he said commandingly as he passed Driver.

"But —"

Crouch hit the lever himself. The smell that swept in was unbearable. He faced into it, descended with his nose held high, turned and faced the bus and all its company. Seeing him out there, surviving in the emberlight, some of the passengers let up the windowshades on that side. Crouch clicked his heels together, put his hand to his brow in a crisp salute, and bowed stiffly at the waist. Then he sprang into the air and was gone.

"Now we take these," Neuron said. Waving a corpsule under Driver's nose.

Sonora also remembered the droplets. She rushed over to Neuron and grabbed it out of his hand.

"This!" she cried. "This is why we're here!"

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"Well, in a sense," Neuron said with a shy smile. "Or hadn't you figured that out yet?"

"I don't mean what you think I mean," she said. But she wasn't sure how to put it. Wherever they were — death, a dream, some other kind of place whose name came not quite so readily to the tongue — they wouldn't have been here except for the drug. They would have been somewhere else completely; perhaps they might have passed through here briefly, on their way to that other place. But instead they had gotten off the road — driven off it almost deliberately — and were now trapped in this...she wanted to call it a borderland, but she wasn't sure it was either a bordering region or a zone between borders. It was more like another planet, that extensive.

"He's wigging out," said one of the original passengers, whose name she had never known. She thought he was talking about Neuron, but he saw she thought that and shook his head, nodding toward the ceiling.

Wild laughter from overhead.

They went out, all of them, to see Crouch turning somersaults in the sky above. He was just luminous enough to be visible.

"Come on, old man!" Neuron yelled, clenching his fists. He had dropped the red tears into a vial he wore around his neck.

"I'm not following him," someone else said.

Crouch hooted at them.

"Where are they?" the bearded kid cried. He sounded mad.

"Right here," Crouch called down to them. "But not right now."

"We know that much," Neuron said. "Should we drop now?"

"Not yet. They're farther ahead. Just follow me."

"Good job, old man." Neuron looked ecstatic, and when the kid saw him, he relaxed, too. "You heard him, Driver! Everyone back on board!"

Sonora went up just before Neuron, who came last. She realized she had smelled nothing outside — not since the moment she stepped out of the bus. As if the decay were only an image of decay, a projection affecting only the eyes. But as she boarded the bus again, she gagged on the stench that followed her in. Driver had his face covered with a monogrammed handkerchief he pulled from the label of his charcoal black uniform. It was a relief when the door shut behind Neuron.

She let him past, smiling broadly when he looked at her, then turned and whispered urgently to Driver: "Don't take those drops!"

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Neuron was looking back at her. She straightened up and walked toward him, feigning easiness. She swayed as the bus moved forward, and Neuron put his arms out to catch her. They went right around her, tighter this time than before. "Whoa, there. Gotcha," he said.

"You sure did." Sonora smiled, hands on his forearms, twisting away. She went down to the mattress, scooting back in between Chad and Yvette. Neuron took a lazy swipe at her, let his arm dangle, and smiled sideways sort of regretfully, as if: *oh well.*

Sonora looked up and saw Driver watching her in the mirror. Concern showed in his face, but she nodded slightly and he looked back at the road, such as it was. Crouch flew on ahead of them, she supposed.

"What is it, Sonora?" Yvette asked, and Chad, hearing the question, looked over.

Chad had bowl-cut hair and a baggy sweater, a long face with the cheeks scooped out of it. One eye wandered. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"The drug," she muttered, low, her hands on either one's knee, so they leaned closer to her. "Those drops. Do you remember taking them?"

"Sure," Chad said. "Just after the Group came on."

"It was just before," Yvette said, with equal certainty.

"But you both took them, right?"

"Yeah. But so what?"

"Something happened to us — and I don't mean the drugs."

"I'm not stupid," Chad said. "I know where we are, Sonora. You're not the only one who can pick up on these things, and it isn't exactly all that subtle."

"I don't think we're exactly where you think we are," Sonora said.

"All right, so is somebody going to say it?"

"We're dead, you mean?" Chad blurted out, laughing a moment after he had said it.

"If we aren't, I'd like to know where we are," said Yvette.

"I think we're sort of dead, yes —"

"*Sort of*?" Chad howled louder.

" — but there's more than that going on. When we died, we were on that stuff, that drug. When you die, you're supposed to, like, let go of things, come all apart, dissolve back into the universe — at least for a while. But we're not getting there. We're stuck somehow, stuck following the Group, just like we

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did in life. Death is supposed to be experienced with clear, concise consciousness — but we were, are, addled. So we're seeing all this instead of the Clear Light."

"Are you saying that even in death, there's drugs?" Chad asked. "Whoaw!"

"So we...we just let it wear off?" Yvette said.

"I hope that works. That's why I'm saying, don't take any more of the stuff. What would it be like, here, to do more of it? What is it? What does it do to you when you're..."

"Dead," said Chad, still laughing.

"There's a peyote paradise," Yvette said. "Maybe this is like that."

"This is no fukkin paradise," Chad said.

"I mean — a drug land. But we're stuck here in our bodies, or our astral bodies, because we're dead...so we're free from anything that would pull us back to the Earth plane, like happens when you come down from peyote."

"Right, baby, I follow that," Chad said. "But what about this, Sonora? What if we don't want to come down off this stuff? I mean, what's up ahead if we do? What are we waking up to, comprende? I mean, the rest of the trip might not be even this pleasant."

"But Chad, this is unnatural! We're not supposed to be here this long."

"Then what the hell are *they* doing here?"

Sonora looked around the bus at the other passengers, most of them unknown to her, yet with stories and lives as full as her own, hard as it was to imagine.

"No, not them," Chad said. "The Group!"

"Maybe they were doing the same stuff as us," Sonora answered. "Or maybe they're not here at all. The crash could have been like a lure, to get us here. To make our bus go out of control."

"Jesus," Chad said. "That's creepy."

"Or maybe they died but they weren't drugged, so that's why they're getting ahead of us, going forward while we're stuck here. So they were on that plane but they weren't drugged at the time —"

"Yeah, right," Chad said. "The Group not drugged. Now you're really stretching things...."

As if to punctuate his sarcasm, there was a blare of music up ahead, a wild chord sweeping through the bus. It electrified them; everyone crowded to the windows except Yvette and Chad, whom Sonora held back.

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"Wait a minute," she said. "What do you think about Neuron?"

"We should ask you that," Yvette said.

"I don't know," Chad said. "Why? What do you think?"

"I think — he's here for a different reason than we are. He's chosen to stay here. I remember him giving us the drugs, in the theater tonight; but we weren't dead yet."

"How do you know we don't have the order of things confused in our memories?" Yvette said. "What if our minds and personalities are breaking up even now?"

"I believe they are, yes, but somehow we got that original drug. Those red drops. What if somehow, someway, Neuron was able to come out to us — out of death, I mean, into the living world."

"What if he's *meant* to," Yvette said.

"I see what you're saying, Sonora," said Chad, dismissing the other. "The guy came out and snatched us, sort of."

"In a way we can't understand."

"Oh, I understand it. He saw you, fell in lust, and went for you the best way he knew how. Only to get you, he had to take all of us, since we're sort of, you know...attached."

Sonora swallowed. "So I'm to blame?"

"He's to blame!" Yvette said.

"Then...what if we're not really dead? I mean, what if this really isn't death, but some other kind of world, like you say? What if the Group, playing up there, really is playing?"

"He's coming," whispered Yvette.

Neuron ducked out of the crowd at the front of the bus. "They're playing. You want to come see?"

He put a hand out to Sonora.

"I can hear, thanks."

"Yeah," Chad said loudly. "We're kind of comfortable now."

Neuron glowered at Chad. He turned away, but took another look at Sonora over his shoulder.

Then the bus stopped, she wasn't sure why. The music had been brewing, early notes of a concert, the warm-up stage, arrival. She looked out a window, raising the shade above her head, and saw light. It was artificial, drifting down from incredibly tall spindly lampposts that arched overhead and dropped blots of light across a concrete wasteland.

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They were in a parking lot. All the garbage they'd passed through was peripheral to this. They had come to another stadium inside the larger one, a relatively tiny arena in the middle of the plain which was itself surrounded by ring-walls.

The black bus was the only vehicle in the lot. Except...yes, far off, around a curve of the stadium, she could see a black airplane, sleek and inky, angled something like the bus with a shimmering exterior, half-diamonds and other geometric planes that made the craft look at once velvety and scaly.

Driver had parked within walking distance of the gates. She could see clots of people moving through the dark arches, down the tunnels that led toward the central stage. Not many, though. She had the impression these were stragglers, hurrying in late.

"It's started already," Neuron said quickly to all of them, like a teacher explaining to a class. He uncapped his vial. "Okay, Crouch will back me up on this, it's time to drop. Who's first?"

Most of the other passengers moved forward. Sonora wanted to stop them, but she didn't dare. It would have to be enough, for now, to save her friends — and herself. They opened their hands and she said nothing. Neuron laid the red corpsules in their palms as they walked past him, down the steps and onto the cement, heading toward the music. Some licked their hands, slurped up the droplets; but she remembered from a sudden tickling in her palm how easily the things were administered.

She whispered, "Drop yours — I mean, get rid of them — as soon as you can. Don't leave them on your skin."

"Why not just refuse?" Yvette said. "I mean, he can't make us take them."

"I can't believe you two," Chad said. "Dead, and afraid to take drugs. What could happen to you now?"

"What if we're not dead?" Yvette said.

"Yvette, you are one confused girl. Do what you want. I'm going for it."

He pushed up from the platform and swaggered past Neuron, who dropped the corpsule in his hand and winked at him. Chad slapped Neuron's shoulder and popped the drop in his mouth, giving a thumbs-up to Sonora and Yvette on his way out.

"Ladies," Neuron said. "You coming?"

"I don't know," Yvette said.

"The show must go on, right? You've got to get off and experience —"

"She doesn't feel up to it," Sonora said.

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"Really?" Neuron pressed toward them. "Don't feel well? Now how can that be?"

"I've got sort of a psychic headache," Yvette said.

"They don't have to go if they don't want to," Driver said quietly.

Neuron stopped where he was and turned back toward him. "What's that?"

"I said, there's no reason for them to get off the bus if they'd rather not."

"But, hey, out here in the parking lot...it gets a little scary during a show."

"I'll be more than happy to stay with them. I've done it many times."

"Done it many times, huh? Look, Driver-man, you're just a suit, all right? A uniform, you get me? Nobody's talking to you. You don't play a part in this."

"Do you want to drive?" Driver said.

Neuron paled, while up inside his hat, his brain blackened, emitting a dark bruised light, purple as an injury. "Look here," he said.

Driver rose as Neuron stalked toward him.

"Hey," said a voice from outside. "What's going on in there?"

It was Crouch.

"Good, you're here," Neuron said. "The driver is giving us trouble this time."

"What? Impossible!"

"Get in and help me."

"I — jeez — can't. These fukkin wings!"

Crouch tried the doorway but got stuck in it. Driver pulled on the door lever and the partitions began to shudder and flap, first crushing Crouch's fingers and pinching his wings so he yelled, then expelling him backward onto the parking lot. Soundlessly, but not before Sonora let out a warning cry, Neuron leapt at Driver. Driver caught him, twisted, and simply shoved. Neuron tumbled down the steps, landing directly atop the howling Crouch.

Driver then, before they could regain their feet, shut the door.

The two staggered upright, clinging to each other for support, livid and furious now. They came toward the door, not seeing it, searching the air with desperate hands. Before they made contact, Driver had already thrown the gears into reverse. They stumbled past the windshield, dismayed to find the bus already gone.

Standing next to Driver, Sonora and Yvette looked down at Neuron and Crouch. The men searched an ever expanding spiral, Driver backing up a few

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yards whenever they approached. Finally they turned and faced each other. Neuron tore off his hat and stomped it flat; Crouch's wings shot out stiffly to both sides.

"This is unbelievable!" Neuron cried. "I can't believe it!"

"You?" said Crouch. "I got these outta the deal!" He jabbed a thumb at his wings. "I knew that driver was trouble from the start."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Why should I have to? Oh, I know. Because you're an idiot!"

"How was I supposed to know?"

"He was different than the other drivers."

"No he wasn't, he was the same. It's been the same guy as long as I can remember, and it was him again. You'd notice any little change in that face. It never changes!"

"He was different tonight!"

Sonora put a hand on Driver's shoulder. "Do you know what they're talking about?"

Driver shook his head.

"Because, I mean, if you're something more than what we think, I just want you to know...we appreciate it."

"Really, I don't have the slightest idea. They're insane. Look at them now."

They were tearing at each other, rolling around on the cement. The old man cried out each time Neuron grabbed his wings, and Neuron winced and growled whenever Crouch hammered him on the crown.

"Give them plenty of room," Sonora said.

Driver pulled away from them completely, starting on a circuit of the stadium's outer walls. As he drove, he slowly turned his course outward, moving away across the empty parking lot and gaining speed as if they were trying to break away from a planet's gravitational field, attaining escape velocity so they could fly off into the night.

"Do you know what you're doing?" Sonora asked.

"Getting some distance."

"What about them, back there?" asked Yvette.

Sonora thought of their friends, the bearded boy, who had taken the drug and wandered into the theater. She hadn't said goodbye to any of them — hadn't the chance. "I guess it'll wear off eventually...and then they'll have to go on. Unless Crouch keeps giving them drugs, and then maybe they'll be here a long time."

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"No," Yvette said. "I meant *them*. In the bunks."

Sonora had forgotten that the bus was not empty.

"I can stop," Driver said. "Before we go any farther. We can unload them."

"What if we need them up ahead?" Sonora said. "What if they really are guides?"

She could imagine them waking in their own time, electing to fly out and scout the way, instead of being rousted irritably and sent half-asleep into the dark on a trivial mission.

"We'll let them sleep then, for now?" Yvette said.

"I guess. We're not going back then, are we?"

"I think the bus could make it through, if you wanted to," said Driver.

"It would have to, wouldn't it?" said Yvette. "I mean, Neuron got out, didn't he? He rode this bus in and out between the worlds?"

"But he never stayed out," Sonora said. "And I think — we only saw him when we'd taken the drugs."

"I thought he gave them to us, though."

"Yeah...."

But that was *before* she remembered first seeing him. Events were out of order; time did not quite dovetail here. That's how he did it, she realized — that's how he gave us what we needed to meet him...before we met him. He wasn't in ordinary time. So he never really reached our world, where each thing follows another, one event gives rise to the next. And we couldn't really

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get all the way back there, probably; not even in the black bus, miraculous as it is. We might pull up alongside our old bus and find it crashed on the mountainside, everyone dead — including ourselves. Who'd want to see that?

We can only go forward, she thought. Besides, maybe we weren't even alive then, in the time before; maybe we were lost in some kind of other place, wandering and vulnerable in a drug-land like the peyote paradise, and that's how he reached us. We were so used to the sensation of dreaming, with all the drugs we took, and everything seeming so unreal all the time anyway — how would we have known if we'd been dead already?

But we've broken that cycle, whatever it was. We're going on now.

Driver's foot was on the floor and the bus kept going faster and faster, picking up speed. Ahead of them, against a sky that was slightly lighter than she remembered, she saw not stadium walls but actual mountains.

"You don't mind driving, do you?" she said, her hand on Driver's shoulder.

He shrugged. "It's what I do." His pained, martyred expression had softened; he looked genuinely content. She realized that she was seeing someone new — not a stranger, but an old acquaintance never seen so clearly until now, and strange because of that. He glanced up into the rearview mirror, meeting her eyes.

"Why don't you two go in back and try to rest?" he said. "I'm fine up here, alone. I'm not sleepy, myself, and there's a long drive ahead."

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"All right," she said. "Come on, Yvette."

She slipped out of her sandals and crawled back among the pillows with Yvette. They lay down and wrapped themselves in blankets, and she thought of her old companions, forgetting their faces as she had earlier forgotten their names. Soft breathing filled the bus, soothing and hypnotic as the engine sound, but coming from the bunks. Her eyes closed. At the last moment before sleep, she recalled that they had not drawn the shades — and wondered if it mattered. Her eyes flickered open, going to the windows across the way. There were stars now, and suggestions of clouds, high and faintly luminous, or reflecting some distant glow. The sight reassured her; she let go of fear. Then she was a child again, lulled, rocking, asleep.

AT THE WHEEL, watching a highway slowly appear out of the receding darkness, Driver could feel the insignificant details of his personality sloughing away with every mile, leaving only the essentials, paring him down to a bare-bone surface solid as the hard, flat road on which the tires hummed. He was, had always been, Driver.

Glancing into the mirror at his sleeping passengers, he was pleased they felt safe enough to sleep. The bus was almost empty, but he knew that eventually it would fill again. Somewhere on the road ahead were numberless hitchhikers and wanderers on foot, pilgrims who might be ready for some company, all headed toward something none of them could name.

Driver kept an eye out for them.

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INDEX TO VOLUME 86, JANUARY-JUNE 1994

Aldridge, Ray:
Filter Feeders (novelet) ..... Jan 5
Armstrong, Michael:
Mother to Elves ..... June 84
Bailey, Dale:
Conquistador ..... May 108
Barnard, Bryn: Cover for
"The Wild Ships of Fairny" ..... March
Barstow, D: Cartoon ..... May
Bash, Kent: Cover for
"Wendy Darling, RFC" ..... April
Benford, Gregory: A Scientist's Notebook:
Ten Thousand Years of Solitude ..... Feb 107
Deep Time ..... April 113
From Here to Eternity ..... June 101
Bisson, Terry:
Partial People ..... Jan 68
Bova, Ben:
Inspiration ..... Apr 6
Bowes, Richard:
The Shadow and the Gunman (novelet) Feb 7
I Died, Sir, In Flame, Sir ..... June 42
Boyett, Steven R.:
Epiphany Beach ..... Apr 123
Bredenberg, Jeff:
Imagine a Large-Breasted Woman ..... Feb 48
Brin, David:
Natulife™ ..... Apr 94
Competition #60: Report ..... Apr 157
Coulter, Lynn:
Granny Woman ..... Jan 33
Couzens, Gary:
Second Contact ..... Mar 40
de Lint, Charles: Books to Look For .... Apr May June
DiChario, Nicholas A.:
Birdie ..... May 31
Drainage ..... June 61
Donnelly, Marcos:
Bloodletting (novelet) ..... June 9
Duchamp, L. Timmel:
When Joy Came to the World ..... Jan 123
Eskridge, Kelley:
Strings ..... Feb 70
Farris, Joseph: Cartoon ..... May
Fitch, Marina:
Sarah at the Tidepool ..... Apr 59
Friesner, Esther M.:
Two Lovers, Two Gods, and a Fable . Mar 72
Garcia Y Robertson, R.:
Wendy Darling, RFC (novelet) ..... Apr 133
Gilman, Carolyn Ives:
The Wild Ships of Fairny (novelet) .... Mar 131
Hardy, David A.: Cover for
"Shepherd's Moon" ..... June
Harris, S.: Cartoons ..... Feb Apr May
Hauser, Frank: Cartoon ..... Mar
Heath, Mark: Cartoons ..... Feb May
Jonik, John: Cartoon ..... Apr June
Kessel, John: Books:
Just Like Real People ..... Feb 39
Canons Left and Right ..... Apr 18
Laidlaw, Mark:
The Black Bus (novelet) ..... June 127
MacLeod, Ian R.:
Sealight ..... May 6
Maio, Kathi: Films:
Dino Might ..... Jan 62
Too Many Ghosts ..... Mar 91
Sick Puppy Auteur? ..... May 121
Martin, Henry: Cartoons ..... Jan Mar
..... Apr May
Masear, Arthur: Cartoons ..... Jan Mar
McDevitt, Jack:
Standard Candles ..... Jan 106
McHugh, Maureen F.:
Virtual Love ..... Jan 95
Metzger, Robert A.:
Planet of the Dolphins ..... Jan 71
Meyer, Ilene: Cover for:
"Planet of the Dolphins" ..... Jan
Morrow, James:
Director's Cut ..... Mar 65
Bible Stories for Adults No. 20:
The Tower ..... June 112
Nagle, Pati:
Coyote Ugly ..... Apr 44
Perry, Steve:
Other Toys ..... Feb 61
Platt, Charles: Inside Science Fiction .... Mar 33
Reed, Robert:
Treasure Buried ..... Feb 119
The Remoras (novelet) ..... May 127
Resnick, Mike:
Birdie ..... May 31
Richerson, Carrie:
Sous La Mer ..... Mar 82
Rosenblum, Mary:
California Dreamer ..... May 86
Rusch, Kristine Kathryn:
Without End ..... Apr 75
Savage, Felicity:
Brixtow White Lady ..... Mar 114
Ash Minette ..... May 49
Shaw, Barclay: Cover for:
"The Remoras" ..... May
Smeds, Dave:
A Marathon Runner in the Human Race . Mar 9
Smith, Dean Wesley:
Jukebox Gifts ..... Jan 42
Stableford, Brian:
Busy Dying (novelet) ..... Feb 138
Steele, Allen:
Shepherd Moon ..... June 77
Sterling, Bruce: Science:
Watching the Clouds ..... Jan 87
Spires on the Skyline ..... Mar 54
The New Cryptography ..... May 73
Wade, Susan:
The Convertible Coven ..... Mar 96
Walotsky, Ron: Cover for
"Busy Dying" ..... Feb
What, Leslie:
Clinging to a Thread ..... Apr 35
Designated Hater ..... May 104
Winter, Laurel:
The Moon Garden Cookbook ..... Feb 87
Yolen, Jane:
The Lady's Garden ..... May 66

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

FINALLY, MY favorite season of the year has arrived. Softball season. I'm a lousy player, but a great watcher — I love the hot sun, the dusty fields, the smell of suntan oil mingled with sweat, the crack of the ball against the bat and the shouted insults of the crowd. In our July issue, we'll have a few stories that celebrate this great American pastime, and its sister sport (the pretty one who gets all the attention), baseball.

In fact, our July cover story looks at a special kind of summer-ball, the kind parents must suffer through: Little League. The Little League team in the town of Brothers' Meeting is having a bad season. On top of a series of bad seasons. So one afternoon, Vic Harris Junior, lover of baseball and Little League hopeful, sends up a silent prayer: *Please, God, give us the way to win.* The next day, a strange-looking twelve-year-old shows up at try-outs... and that's only the beginning of the problems when **Esther M. Friesner** puts "Jesus at the Bat."

Of course, not all of our stories will revolve around the Boys of Summer. **Nina Kiriki Hoffman** decides to take on ghosts of a new and different kind in her novella, "Haunted Humans."

Finally, we have an extra-special treat in July. Science columnist **Bruce Sterling** visited the site of the superconducting supercollider and brings back one of the best reports we've seen in years. Our science columnists must be on a roll, because in August, **Gregory Benford** will share his experiences (from a scientist's perspective) in last fall's Southern California wildfires. Two not-to-be-missed essays.

And we have even more in store. **Ursula K. Le Guin** and **Ray Bradbury** return to our pages after too long an absence. **Parke Godwin** deals with the devil and **Jack Williamson** takes us to Mars. **Harlan Ellison** gives us a wonderful novelette written around a **James Gurney** cover. So find our subscription form and renew now.

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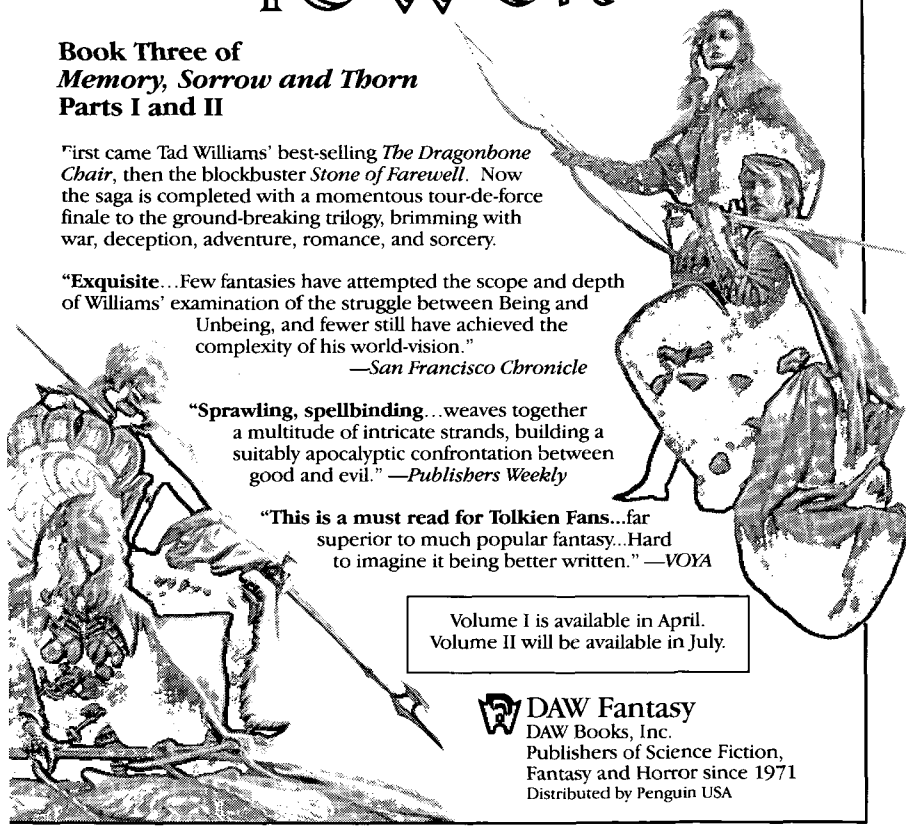

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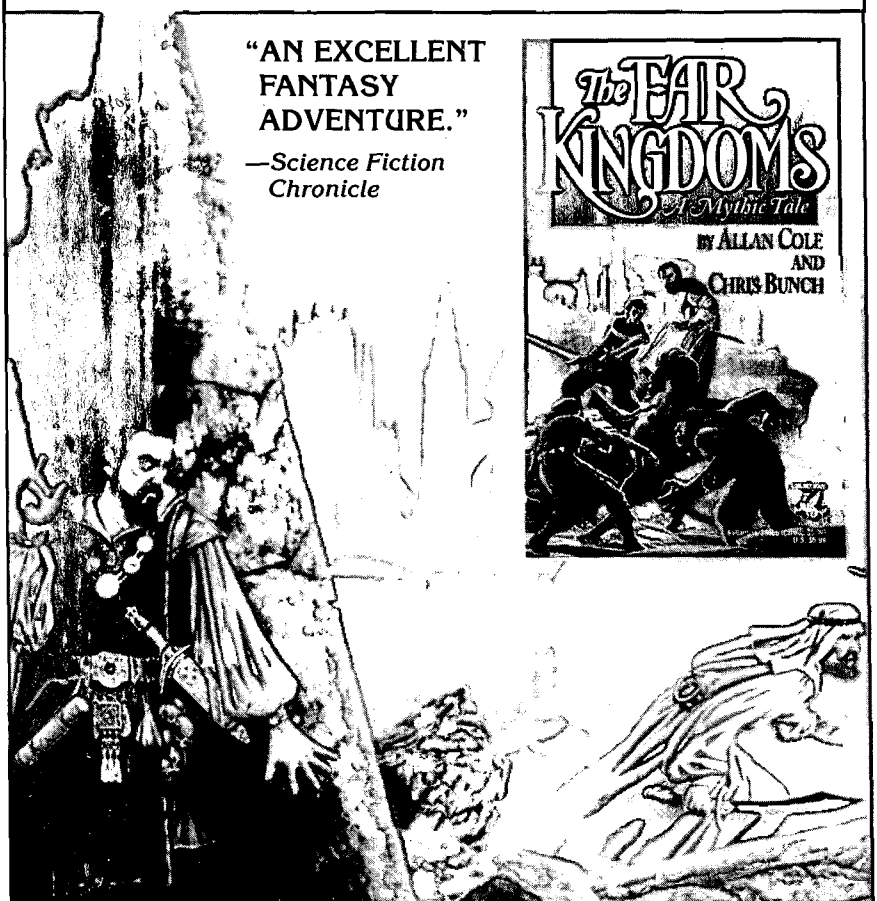

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